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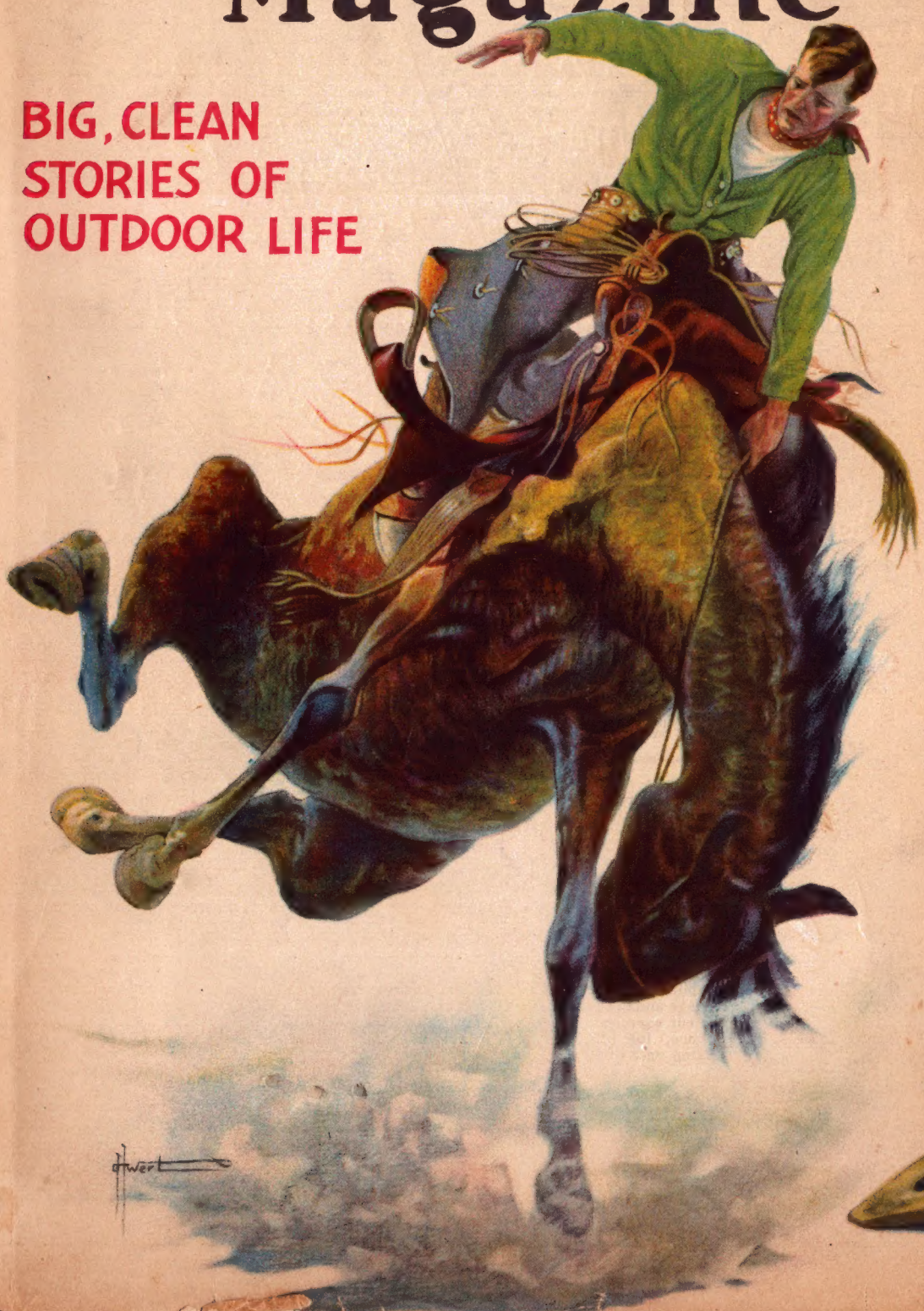
Western Story Magazine

BIG, CLEAN STORIES OF OUTDOOR LIFE



Feel like a New Man in Two Minutes

Amazing Restoration in SPINE-MOTION

HOBART BRADSTREET
65 Years Young

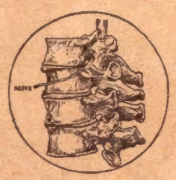
YOU never give a thought to that spine of yours, do you? If you did you would be another man altogether. You'd have twice the energy you have—twice the strength and stamina. You'd pitch into your work with the avidity of a boy for play. You'd revel in anything that meant activity. You'd be a superman compared to what you are.

But, vital as it is, you pay no attention to your spine. What are the consequences? A word about the spine will explain.

The spine is a series of small bones placed one above the other. Between each pair of bones (vertebrae) is a cartilage which acts as a cushion or shock absorber, taking up the weight and shocks thrown on the spinal column as we stand or walk. Since nothing in the ordinary activities of us humans stretches the spine, these once soft and resilient pads are flattened down, become thin and hard. One's spine then does not absorb the shocks sustained *but transmits them straight to the base of the brain.* Then come headaches — backaches — "nerves" — insomnia—habitual tiredness. We have not one-half the force and "pep" we should have. We do not get the joy out of work or play we should. We are only about 50 per cent efficient.

When the cartilage is worn down to a certain point, nerve impingement may result. That is, two of the vertebrae may curve so close together as to "pinch" or press upon a nerve leading from the spinal column to an organ which the nerve controls. Then there *is* trouble! If the impinged nerve has to do with the liver, then liver trouble. If with the stomach, stomach trouble. If with the bowels, constipation. And so on.

Why You Must Keep Your Spine "ELONGATED"



How bones close in on the delicate nerves when the spine "settles," shriveling the nerves and draining vitality.

How "elongating" the spine keeps the bones apart and the nerves full and free to perform their functions.

Why the Spine Needs Stretching

The spine needs the peculiar motion, the flexing, the laxation, it would get if we lived as man primeval did, in order to loosen up the spine—to "elongate" it—to take the burden off the cartilage and the pressure off the nerves. No amount of violent exercise will do the trick, we know from experience, for often the most inveterate gymnast is a striking case of sub-laxation of the spine.

From my 25-year experience with spinal mechanics, I have evolved a method of SPINE-MOTION which seems to be the answer to the problem. My method of "laxating" the spine is a simple, boiled-down formula of just five movements. Neither takes more than one minute, so the whole process means but five minutes a day. But those movements, simple as they are, bring a wonderful change—*almost instantly!* **I have had many people come to me saying they were in perfect health and wanted to try my motion just out of curiosity, only to be amazed with the feeling of new exhilaration experienced in one execution of my spinal-motions.** Only the other day a prominent Chicago business man, known as a human dynamo, remarked to me after a few days of my system, "I didn't realize until now that I was only 50 per cent alive."

I have seen my spinal motions put sick people on their feet in a few days. I have seen many a chronic case of headache, nervousness, stomach trouble and constipation completely relieved in a matter of weeks. Speaking of constipation, I have one motion—a peculiar, writhing and twisting movement—that will, in fifteen minutes, in nine cases out of ten, bring a complete evacuation.

I Promise You Startling Results

I know that there is something in my method for everyone, and I invite everyone to try it. I invite the young and the apparently "vigorous" to see what difference spine motion will make in their energies and capacities. I invite the ailing to see the direct relation between spinal mechanics and health. I invite men who are ageing prematurely to put to test my statement that a man's powers (in every sense) by nature, should continue full flush up to the age of 60, being only a matter of a sound nerve-mechanism.

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Western Story Magazine

EVERY WEEK

Vol. LXIII **Contents for September 11, 1926** **No. 4**

TWO NOVELETTES

Dig Down, Delong . . . . . *Robert Ormond Case* . . 3

Black Venom . . . . . *Reginald C. Barker* . . 52

TWO SERIALS

Trouble Trail . . . . . *George Owen Baxter* . . 23
A Six-part Story—Part Three

The Man from Wyoming . . *Joseph B. Ames* . . . 78
A Six-part Story—Part Six

FOUR SHORT STORIES

No Gent to Fool With . . . *Ernest Haycox* . . . 40

Honey for Silvertip . . . . *Austin Hall* . . . 104

With the Hammer on Safety . . *Frank Triem* . . . 113

Riding Blazes . . . . . *Ray Humphreys* . . . 121

TWO ARTICLES

Your Dog . . . . . *David Post* . . . 128
(The Schipperke)

Miners—Lucky and Unlucky . . *Britton Davis* . . . 130

MISCELLANEOUS

Montana Air Against California Air . . 22
Montana's Vanishing Americans . . . 39
Woman Succeeds as Game Warden . . 77
A Girl of the Oregon Woods . . . 103
A Woman Dude Wrangler . . . 120
Cattle Rustlers Still Active 129
Dude Ranches Popular 132
Rounding Up the Teton Wild Horses . . 138
Improving Spanish Padre's Trail . . . 141
Rodeo Rider Fatally Hurt 141

DEPARTMENTS

The Round-up . . . . *The Editor* . . . 133

The Hollow Tree . . . . *Helen Rivers* . . . 136

Where to Go and How to Get There . *John North* . . . 139

Missing 142

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Timber Beasts and Buckaroos

A Novelette

By ROBERT ORMOND CASE

Tossing his tattered panama in the air, an inebriated but, nevertheless, dignified old reprobate shouts one word; and "Dynamite" Smith, the honor of the cattlemen at stake, hears that booming cry.

The Temple of the Sun

A Serial

By ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS

Under the fallen walls of an Aztec temple, forgot by the dead priests who worshiped there, shines gold as bright as love, as old as treachery.

Holsters Tied Down

A Novel

By GEORGE GILBERT

In the dim light three outlaws gamble for a girl; and in the doorway, hands on six-guns, holsters tied down, appears the figure of "Bronch" Crashin, bandit and killer.

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Western Story Magazine

EVERY WEEK

Vol. LXIII SEPTEMBER 11, 1926 No. 4

Dig Down, DeLong

By Robert Ormond Case

Author of "Windy and Lonesome, Driven to Cover," etc.

WHEN the supper dishes had been washed and stacked away at the McQuirk-DeLong homestead, the partners turned toward the doorway with one accord and stepped forth into the mellowness of gathering twilight. They seated themselves on the broad step and reached automatically for the "makings." Presently, matches flared in the gloom, cigarettes glowed, and the hard-bitten pair leaned back against the scarred threshold to enjoy a restful interval of royal ease.

The quiet of summer evening was abroad in the land. The heat of the day had passed. The hue of the sky was deepening to an unfathomable blue. Against this background, like jewels in a velvet setting, stars glittered with growing brilliance. To the westward, color harmony was ebbing on the heels of the setting sun, while to the east a pale radiance beyond the pinnacles foretold the present rising of a gorgeous summer moon.

The reactions of the partners to these phenomena were radically different. "Windy's" harsh and forbidding features seemed to have caught and held some of the mellowness about him. His black mustache bristled with satisfaction, and in his black, glittering eyes, that rested with apparent aimlessness on the western horizon, was the serenity of

one who enjoys a pleasant interval before proceeding on a journey that will be yet more enjoyable.

But "Lonesome's" pale-blue eyes were fixed unseeingly on the eastward pinnacles. His tawny mustache drooped disconsolately across his square jaw. Far from uplifting him, each item of the far-flung splendor of the summer night seemed to add to his dejection and melancholy. He cast away his cigarette presently and reached for his plug of tobacco.

"You're right, DeLong," he said abruptly, though Windy had said nothing. "It's a fine, large evening. The sun's gone down, and the moonlight is on the pinnacles. Anybody with half an eye could see what you're thinking about. I can danged near hear the wheels go round. You figger that this is the precise kind of night that is made to order. You aim to rise up pretty soon and saddle your critter and go and call on the widow. You've got a mental image of old Windy DeLong, busted-down buckaroo, ornery as a bronc with a Roman nose, fifty years old and worthless by choice, sitting on the bench in front of the cabin door with the said blushing lady at your side, talking over sweet nothings at considerable length and contemplating the moon. You feel that a way, caballero?"

He spoke with such bitterness that Windy eyed him with tolerant amusement.

"As a mind reader, McQuirk," he murmured complacently, "you're a humdinger of a blacksmith. At ten dollars per reading, you couldn't buy postage stamps. But it's an idea at that." He pretended to deliberate over these suggestions. "Funny, it hadn't occurred to me. Yes, sir, it has its points. Leave me meditate over it a minute or two whilst I gather strength to saddle my critter. Meanwhile, let me inquire how soon you aim to start for Shuttler's Flats to call on the schoolma'am."

"I ain't," said Lonesome. "And before your rosy-hued dream has got too strong a hold on you, let me tell you you've got to stay here, too. There ain't going to be no long-whiskered buckaroo dancing among the Shasta Daisies to-night. I'm in a jack pot, DeLong."

"How come?" Windy's eyes glittered with real interest as he stared at his partner. "I seen you was kind of bore down with grief ever since you come from Condon this afternoon."

"Bore down!" repeated Lonesome. "If my grief was bricks, I'd sink to my hips in solid rock. You got no idea how bad off I am, Windy. It'll serve as a clew when I tell you that I need your help. You know how it goes. A drowning man will take hold of a straw."

"Let's hear it," said Windy with a martyred air. "But let me tell you, McQuirk, your grief has got to be hefty to keep me from riding over to the Springs to-night. Ever since you mentioned it, I've been r'aring to get going. Nights like these ain't made to be wasted."

"As I rode into Condon to-day," began Lonesome, "I seen the schoolma'am."

"That's a plenty," Windy interrupted, his mustache bristling. "Stop where you are, McQuirk, and back up. You don't have to go no further. If you've had a row with the schoolma'am, it don't interest me none. Love spats like them is like boils on your neck. They look big to you, but they don't mean nothing to me. Well, I've got to go now."

"Wait," pleaded Lonesome. "You don't know the half of it. Ain't I said I needed your help? That shows how bad off I am.

"Coming into Condon," he continued pessimistically, "I met up with the schoolma'am. She was just leaving town, headed north toward Shuttler's

Flats. Any other day but this, that would have been fine. I could have persuaded her to wait a minute or two while I done some errands, and then I'd ride around with her to Shuttler's Flats on the way home. But this time, I see right away that I'm sunk. She wasn't riding alone.

"He was a slick-haired dude"—Lonesome's voice was plaintive—"all togged out like a Shasta Daisy, in riding breeches and what not. He's wearing gloves and a necktie and horn-rimmed glasses. He's a city feller with lady-like manners and a white face. And behind them heavy glasses, his eyes is kind of round and cold like a fish.

"When I ride up, they're communing frank and earnest. He's supplying the eloquence, and she's listening real attentive. The schoolma'am introduces us, and this critter takes off his gloves and shakes hands and says, 'Pleased indeed.' And whilst we're talking, he looks me up and down and then looks at the schoolma'am, kind of puzzled, as much as to say, 'My dear young lady, pardon me if I am in error, but is this mangy mongrel a friend of yours?'

"I says to this critter, trying to be friendly, and to make conversation, 'You're a stranger in these parts, ain't you, partner?'

"'I was,' says this Romeo, and he grins at the schoolma'am like a Wampus cat. I get hot under the collar to observe the schoolma'am smile back at him, and she looks at me with them blue eyes of her, as much as to say, 'Ain't he big and noble and cute?'

"'This is a mighty interesting country,' I says to this stall-fed hombre. 'You aim to stay here long?'

"'That depends,' he says, whilst he give the schoolma'am another grin, 'on what success I have.' But he ain't so dumb, neither, for he gives me a kind of fishy look and says, 'It's a nice day, isn't it?'

"Well, we talk around a little bit, and this critter is holding his cap in his hand all the while and his blond hair, which is parted in the middle and all wavy and nice, shines beautiful and golden in the sunlight. He's smiling and at ease. Both of them are riding good horses, and they look like they both stepped right out of one of them fashion books. And all the while, I can feel the hair sprouting on my neck, and my hands are getting bigger and redder. I feel disreputable, mangy, and shaggy by comparison with this barber's pet. I'm an ignorant maverick and a little dumb to boot. I don't know nothing and couldn't tell anybody if I did. And when I reach for my plug of tobacco, and bite off a hunk to kind of soothe my feelings and put me at ease, this critter looks at the schoolma'am as much as to say, 'Observe the brand of fodder the animal craves.'"

Lonesome squirmed uncomfortably at the memory and reached for his plug of tobacco.

Windy chuckled. "They's a green-eyed monster been whispering in your ear, McQuirk. It's done warped your judgment. They's lots of dudes that outweigh their clothes. This slick-haired lad may be all right in his place."

"It's a big world," stated Lonesome emphatically. "His place is a long ways off."

Windy eyed his partner with some irritation.

"Well, why didn't you send him on his way? Why didn't you get hard with him? You could have said to this four-eyed stranger, real soft and gentle: 'Mister, you're an eloquent cuss. But how do you stack up when it comes to action? I'm a little heavy-footed when I'm surrounded by conversation. But when a massacre starts, I'm a silver-tongued orator.'"

"He was protected by the company he was in," Lonesome pointed out. "You know danged well the schoolma'am wouldn't stand for no primitive

stuff like that. So I rode away talking to myself, heading toward Condon. The schoolma'am and this dude continue on their way toward Shuttler's Flats, laughing and carefree. They're like a couple of thoroughbred colts, kicking up their heels in the green pasture where there's shade and clover. I'm a flea-bitten maverick up among the blistering rimrock where the hoss flies is thickest. I'm an outsider looking in, and they's a high fence that I can't bust through. Do you get me?"

"I do," said Windy. "Being educated and so forth, the pair of them has got the bulge on you. They've got a lot to talk about that don't mean nothing to you. Who is this dude anyway? What's his business? What did you find out about him?"

"Nothing. They's something fishy about this critter besides his eyes. I inquired around a little in Condon, but all I could find out was that he blew in three or four days ago and has been making trips out into the country ever since. Nobody could tell me a thing about him or what his business was, if any.

"The more I thought of it, the less I liked him. So I figgered I'd ride around by Shuttler's Flats on the way home to kind of talk it over with the schoolma'am."

"You got an appetite for punishment," murmured Windy admiringly. "I expect when you showed up at Jim Norton's, this lizard was still chinning with the schoolma'am, huh?"

"He was." Lonesome scowled darkly at the memory. "If loafers was prize winners, this lily-fingered gent would have to carry his gold medals in a suit case, he'd be that loaded down. When I come up to Norton's, hot and dusty from riding across the sweltering plains, I find the pair of them sitting in the shade of that big locust tree in Norton's yard, sipping lemonade as restful and cool as a couple of cucumbers. Figger how it got me all ruffled up just to look at them.

"'Well,' I says to this lizard real blunt, 'I didn't expect to find you here.'

"'It's mutual,' he says, grinning, 'but the pleasure is mine. Dismount,' he continued real cordial, 'and I'll bring a chair for you. You look like you need a little refreshment. Any one of your age,' he says, 'shouldn't ride so far in the heat of the day.'

"'He's boarding here at Norton's for a day or two,' the schoolma'am speaks up real quick, seeing that I'm a little peeved at this thoughtful lad. 'He's got a little business to transact at this end of the county. Are you sure you won't stop for a minute or two? We've got lots of lemonade.'

"'No, thanks,' I says. 'I'm liable to bite a hunk out of one of them pretty glasses. Partner,' I addresses this hombre real simple, 'I'm mighty interested in the line of work you're following. If you can tear yourself away for a spell this evening, suppose you ride around to my shack across the John Day, and we can chin a little.'

"The critter looks at me kind of puzzled. The schoolma'am is also looking at me real surprised.

"'Odd,' he says, still sizing me up. 'Deucedly peculiar. So you're interested in my line of work, eh? Who would have suspected such a thing? In traveling about,' he says to the schoolma'am, 'one meets some unique characters among these old-timers. They have such an unusual sense of humor. Now that,' he says, 'is a comical idea.'

"'Mr. McQuirk,' the schoolma'am hurries to explain, and I'm pleased to note that she's a little peeved at this genteel hombre, 'is a substantial citizen of this community. He's a gentleman of broad tastes and considerable worldly experience. His partner,' she continued, 'is also of superior intellect. He's a school director in this district,' she says."

"That red-headed gal," put in Windy warmly, "knows a thing or two. I got a superior intellect, have I? Yes, sir, she can see through a barbed-wire fence. Continue, McQuirk. Continue."

"When she said that, this buzzard sat up and took notice," Lonesome continued. "'My error,' he says, and looks at me for the first time like I'm a human being. 'I jumped at conclusions too hastily. So you weren't joking when you invited me to call on you this evening, eh?'

"'I wasn't, and I ain't,' I says, looking at him real hard. 'It's an invitation. It ought to be plumb interesting for both of us.'

"'I'll do it,' he says, real quick, 'since you put it that way. You can expect to see me early in the evening, Mr. McQuirk.'

"It's funny," Lonesome mused, "much as I hate that critter, and much as I crave to lay hands on him when there ain't no spectators, I ain't got him quite figgered out. White-faced and lily-fingered as he is, a four-eyed dude and a tenderfoot, and all that, I got a hunch they's considerable iron in his system. It's either nerve or ignorance, or both. Whatever it is, I give him credit for it. He knew danged well I wasn't inviting him over to any love feast. I give him the eye as I done so, and he comes right back at me, cool as you please. 'I'll be over early in the evening, Mr. McQuirk,' he says, careless as if he was saying, 'cut yourself a piece of cake.'"

Windy eyed his partner expectantly. But Lonesome apparently had nothing further to impart. Windy stared restlessly and cast a covert glance at the golden glory of the summer moon high above the westward pinnacles.

"It's an interesting business," he said at length. "You got my sympathy, McQuirk. You're entitled to it. But there ain't none of them details that is keeping me from riding over to the Springs to-night. Where in blazes do I come in? That's something my superior intellect has done failed to grasp."

"You want to take that superior intellect idea with a grain of salt," observed Lonesome. "On that particular point the schoolma'am done overreached herself. I've explained this whole layout. He's coming over to call on us this evening. Well, anybody with half an eye could see what I aim to do to this optimistic lily of the field. I aim to give him a delicate hint or maybe even a swift kick pointing to the fact that he's galloping around in the wrong range."

"What of it? I ain't lost any dudes, McQuirk. You don't need no help to point out to this critter the error of his ways."

"That's just where you're wrong," said Lonesome emphatically. "I need your moral support and need it bad. I've told you how this buzzard makes me feel like a hairy product of the wide-open spaces. The maverick's so sure of himself and knows so danged much about things I never heard of before that he kind of gets my goat. If it was action alone, they'd be nothing to it. But it's what you might call a mental hazard. So I figger that the only way to get by is for both of us to gang up on him."

"What you aim to do?" demanded Windy. "Are you going to reason with this critter? It seems to me the thing to do is to throw such a scare into him that all the heavy mental work he'll be able to do is figger how fast he can burn up the dust getting out of the Condon country."

"Correct," agreed Lonesome. "But we've got to use what you might call finesse. We've got to impress him with the fact that he's crossed the trail of two of the hardest hombres in seven states. He appeals to me as one of these intelligent hounds that has got to be sold on an idea pretty thorough before he's convinced. That's where I'm

liable to fall down on the job if I was to handle him alone. The critter kind of bears me down with his highbrow line of conversation. I'm like a bad horse who knows how tough he is, but something tells him a hombre that knows more than he does is riding easy in the saddle."

"You've got me interested," Windy conceded, his mustache bristling. "I reckon I'd better sit in with you, McQuirk. Whereas, something tells me I'm making a mistake mixing up in this business. I'm superstitious about these four-eyed fellows. But he'd ought to furnish us a little amusement at that——"

"Listen," Lonesome interrupted, holding up his hand. "Somebody is coming now. I'll gamble it's him."

The sound of an approaching horseman was distinctly audible. Also, a well-trained baritone voice raised in song.

"It's him," said Lonesome. "Even his singing is tailor-made. Now get set, caballero. Remember that from the ears up, this maverick is one ring-tailed wild cat."

"They's a wild cat going to squawl to-night," averred Windy. "McQuirk and DeLong is on his trail. The last named being a gent of superior intellect."

"Now don't you forget, Windy. We're the original pitiless pair. We're hard. We're brutal."

"Brutal as they make them," agreed Windy, his black eyes glittering. "Hard as nails."

"You and me is bashful gents," Lonesome pointed out. "You tell him how tough I am, and I'll do the same for you."

"Fair enough," chuckled Windy. "I never did like to be hampered by the truth. We're getting tougher every minute."

The horseman was drawing nearer. The singing was louder now, more clear, more rich in tone. The distant ridges threw back the pleasing echo. In the voice of the lone singer raised in the quiet night was a dominant, joyous note as though the owner thereof found himself akin to the far-flung splendor of the moon-bathed hills, the whispering sage, and the stars.

He was clearly discernible now in the moonlight, his splendid horse approaching up the last gradual rise in the cañon at a brisk walk. Lonesome was familiar with every detail of the other's appearance. But Windy examined him keenly with an interest that, deep within him, was secretly tinged with envy and admiration. Envy for the careless and dominant youth of the approaching rider, and almost irritated admiration for the confidence and self-assurance that amounted almost to a swagger.

The stranger was a well-set-up youth in his late twenties, nattily tailored, almost debonair. His riding breeches were cut with a flare foreign to the Condon country. Boots and spurs alike gleamed in the moonlight. The satin flanks of his bay thoroughbred, which Windy recognized as the pick of the saddle string from Lem's livery stable at Condon, glistened in rippling waves. As the stranger drew near, his white teeth glittered suddenly in a smile, and his heavy glasses beamed upon them owlishly.

"Gentlemen," he greeted them heartily as he pulled up. His voice was deep, cultured, and precise. "Is this the McQuirk-DeLong homestead? Ah, there, McQuirk, I see you now." The saddle creaked musically as he swung to the ground. "It's a beautiful evening, what?"

"DeLong," said Lonesome gruffly, "this is that gilded lily I was telling you about. Meet Mr. Lamb, Mr. Harold Lamb."

"Well, I'm danged," chuckled Windy as he seized the stranger's hand in a

grasp of steel. "Lamb, you're associating with wolves to-night."

He released the stranger's hand and smote him resoundingly on the back with weight if not with sincerity.

"Fine," said the other warmly, and he in turn smote Windy on the back, with such enthusiasm that the latter's lean shoulder blades ached with the memory of it for days thereafter. "I like wolves. I make it a practice to associate with them."

"Fair enough." On Windy's harsh and forbidding features was a faint suggestion of puzzled surprise. "I can see you're a young feller struggling to get along. Maybe we can teach you a trick or two. Meanwhile, anchor your critter beneath the locust tree and come into the den." The cheerful youth tethered his horse as suggested, and the trio turned back to the cabin.

Windy realized that Lonesome had failed to convey to him a correct impression of the gilded stranger. Despite his heavy, horn-rimmed glasses, he was no cripple. He was as tall as the hard-bitten partners, and well built. From the grip of his hand and the solidness of his broad back, Windy knew that his natty appearance was deceptive. He was not nearly as soft as he looked.

He recognized, however, Lonesome's psychological reaction to the finished correctness of manner and speech, the easy self-assurance of the fastidious stranger. He felt uncouth and shaggy beside him, hard-featured and unkempt. Noting the stranger's springy, resilient tread, he realized suddenly that long years on the range had made him bowed of leg. He felt himself to be slouchy and shiftless, somewhat gangling of arms and hairy of neck, misshapen, disreputable.

He fought against the feeling and eyed the youth with kindling animosity as they entered the cabin.

Lonesome lighted the bracket lamp above the oilcloth-covered table. The cabin was lighted in gloomy relief. The stranger glanced about him, his blue eyes, behind the heavy lenses, wide and curious. He was obviously much impressed with the neatness of the cabin, the shining array of kitchen utensils behind the stove, the two bunks at the farther end of the long room, with blankets folded in almost military neatness. His glance rested with brief intentness on the brace of highly polished and efficient weapons suspended in their holsters on a peg above each bunk.

He turned back to the partners. Lonesome waved him to a seat in the rawhide-upholstered chair beside the table. The old-timer seated himself opposite. Windy leaned negligently against the wall, one thumb hooked in his belt, the lean fingers of the other hand holding a brown cigarette whose curling smoke rose in a thin spiral toward the ceiling. Less experienced men than the gilded stranger might have noticed in the pose of the two ex-gunfighters a suggestion of joyous expectancy masked behind the bland and placid manner.

The misguided youth leaned back comfortably in his chair, crossed his well-tailored knees, and beamed upon the hard-bitten partners.

"I am very favorably impressed with your establishment here," he said. The graceful wave of his hand included the interior of the cabin. "Men's characters are reflected in their immediate environment. Rough and primitive though it is, this house is your home. The fact that you keep it up in such a neat and orderly fashion speaks highly of you both. Yes, indeed." He nodded approval of his own sentiments. "Situated as you are on the outer fringe of civilization, it might have been easy to return to barbarism. The fact that you have not is evidence that in you the urge toward finer things is not entirely submerged."

"Much obliged," said Windy gravely.

"I get the general drift of your remarks. We try to keep the boar's nest swamped out. Only thing is, we've got to clean house again after every killing."

"This is where you slaughter your victims, is it?" inquired the stranger, drawing forth a silver cigarette case from his waistcoat pocket, and extracting a cigarette.

"At the full of the moon," averred Windy, jerking his thumb toward his partner. "I can't hold McQuirk down no more. Just about that often he craves a little excitement. He's a pretty good feller, Lonesome is. He ain't got many bad habits. He's about as gentle a hombre as you'd want to meet. He's only got that one little weakness. They's just naturally got to be a killing every once in a while. It kind of soothes his feelings. Wolves howl on nights when the moon is riding high. You probably noticed what a beautiful moon they was to-night."

There was a sinister implication in his words. The stranger contemplated Lonesome with great interest as he lighted his cigarette. That worthy returned his glance unwinkingly, the shadow of his tawny mustache motionless across his fighting jaw.

"Windy's hard, too," said Lonesome, "hard as granite. Don't get no wrong ideas about Windy. When I see a stranger and don't like his looks, the only reason I fetch him here to listen to his last words is so Windy can take a hand in the proceedings. Being my partner, he's entitled to it.

"Down in Alabaster, ten-fifteen years ago," he continued, warming to his theme, "Windy was walking along the street at night and they was a half dozen greasers that was full of hooch and done mistook him for some one else. They run out of a dark alley and leaped on his back. Windy was kind of absent-minded. He shook them off and didn't pay no attention to them at first. But they pestered him, and he finally lost his temper. When the dust had cleared away, the spectators was able to piece together the remains of five of them greasers. But they never did find the sixth. The dust was pretty thick at the time in the road, and I expect he was just naturally tromped under foot.

"Anyway," Lonesome continued calmly, "a week or so later Windy come to me and pulls off his shirt and says, 'McQuirk, for the past few days they's been something itching my back. Give it a look. I'm afraid a blasted woodtick has took hold and dug in.' So I give it a look. And what do you suppose I found? A knife blade four inches long. It was busted off and buried in his back. Been there ever since that battle with the greasers. So I pulled it out, and Windy was real relieved. 'I'm glad it wasn't a woodtick,' he says as he pulls on his shirt again. 'Them critters is poisonous.' "

Windy eyed his partner with a look of grudging admiration that was lost on the stranger. "Being a modest and humble polecat, I wouldn't have hung that yarn on myself," he opined, his mustache bristling. "But listen, Lamb, whilst I tell you about McQuirk and the cougar. That is, if you got any idea McQuirk is as easy-going as he looks."

"Do tell me," insisted the stranger. "This is immensely interesting."

"Over in the Powder River Valley," began Windy, "they is a bunch of old-timers that is hard and tough. They got that reputation in a country where the only time a man wears a necktie is when they's a trap door under his feet. So when me and McQuirk began to hear stories about the big cougar that had got them old-timers buffaloed, we didn't take no stock in it. But when the yarns kept getting bigger and bigger, and the critter kept killing stock right and left, and finally sneaked away with a four-hundred-pound hog that an old-timer was fattening for market, we began to

take notice. And when the said cougar came down into the valley and took a two-year-old steer right out of the pasture and dragged him over a mountain into the tall timber, we decided to go and investigate.

"It seems no one had ever seen this cougar. But they'd seen his tracks and they was danged near as big as a washtub. The old-timers had hunted this critter for a hundred miles in all directions and they'd never even seen it. We told them not to worry no more, McQuirk and DeLong was on the job. Right away they began to feel better.

"We rounded up a dozen of the best cougar hounds they was in the Powder Valley and started out to trail this big cat. It's a long story how far we trailed that maverick. He'd gotten a hunch they was a different breed of men on his trail, and he began to burn up the dust. We crossed three mountain ranges and two deserts. We wore out all them hounds and lost all our weapons swimming across a thirty-foot creek that the critter had jumped across. And finally we treed him in a lone pine on the top of a high hill.

"He was about as big as a buckskin horse, and he lay along a big limb, and he was grinning and spitting at us and waiting for us to make the next move. So we heaved rocks at the critter to shake him down. But he hangs onto the limb and snarls and spits and every once in a while he makes a pass at them rocks as they whiz by, like he was playing handball.

"After discussing the situation, me and McQuirk gets us a big club each and I shin up the tree while McQuirk stays on the ground. I get up to the limb, but the critter don't wait for me to come close. He's getting all bunched up, ready to jump. 'Look out, McQuirk,' I yells. 'Here he comes!' And I ain't no sooner than said it than the critter leaped down, right smack on top of McQuirk, and bore him down. From where I am up the tree, I can't see nothing but the cougar, and McQuirk is underneath."

He paused dramatically and rolled another cigarette.

"My word," breathed the stranger, "what a ghastly business! And McQuirk had no weapons except his club?"

"He didn't have no time to use his club," averred Windy. "I says to myself, 'Pore old Lonesome's the toughest hombre that ever lived exclusively on raw meat, but he's done met his Waterloo.' I'm sliding down the tree like a sailor coming down a rope. And whilst I'm doing this, I observe that McQuirk ain't down and out yet. Fact is, for the time being he's got the upper hand of this critter. He's on his feet again, and he's got a hold of this said critter's tail and he's swinging the critter round and round like a boulder on the end of a rope. The cougar's pawing the air, spitting and squawling. But he can't do nothing.

"'Get your club, Windy,' yells McQuirk. 'Stand in the clear and sock him as he goes by.'

"I try to follow instructions, but it can't be done. Notwithstanding that this cougar is supported in the air only by the fact that McQuirk is anchored to his tail, he's able to dodge every time I swing at him. Every time he comes around I make a pass at him until I'm plumb wore out. And we ain't getting nowhere.

"Finally," concluded Windy impressively, "Lonesome done lost his temper. He moved over all of a sudden and swung this critter against the tree so hard that he was wrapped clean around it and killed dead as a doornail. And that was that. We couldn't get the critter off the tree, so we skinned him where he was. The hide was so blamed heavy it took us danged near two weeks to get back to the Powder Valley. It was the biggest cougar skin ever seen in them parts.

"And that's the kind of gentle hombre that McQuirk is." Windy indicated his partner with a careless gesture. "You're sitting across the table from an easy-going gent that would kill a man-eating cougar with his bare hands. Yes, sir, that's just how hard he is."

Notwithstanding that the incident of Windy's disagreement with the greasers and Lonesome's even more lurid encounter with the cougar had been told in an easy, almost conversational tone, the anecdotes had been expressly devised for the purpose of impressing the youthful, gilded stranger with the fact that he was traveling in hard-bitten company. The first hint that their visitor was not entirely overwhelmed by these recitals was found in his reaction to the cougar story. He leaned back more comfortably and beamed upon Windy.

"I thought when you arrived at the most thrilling part of that story that the climax would have been entirely different," he confessed, smiling. "A better means of dispatching the animal has occurred to me."

"Better!" echoed Windy, aggrieved. "What else could he have done? He had a hold of the critter's tail, didn't he? I told you we didn't have no weapons. He couldn't let go, could he? What the Sam Hill else was there to do?"

"Very simple," said the stranger tolerantly. "It is really quite obvious. After being swung about in that manner for a considerable period of time, the animal was undoubtedly quite dizzy. McQuirk should simply have released him. The creature, being dizzy, would, without doubt, have run in a circle until it died from exhaustion."

The partners started and exchanged glances. Windy fixed a glittering eye upon the stranger. Any but a brave heart would quail beneath that glance.

"Son," he inquired softly, "advancing a funny idea that a way don't mean you figger there's something haywire about my yarn?"

"Not at all." The youth's gesture indicated a generous and broad-minded point of view. "The story was excellent. I was merely calling attention to your faulty technique. Many singular things can happen under the stress of unusual circumstances. I am not the man to doubt a story, no matter how unique it may appear."

He spoke reminiscently, and with a dainty finger flicked the ashes from his cigarette.

"I am reminded of a story told by a primitive gentleman named McClung in Alaska. I don't really know why your cougar story should call it to mind, since in this incident McClung was pursued by a bear, while you two gentlemen were, on the contrary, pursuing the cougar. As this McClung person told it himself, he was prospecting up in the Alaska wilderness when a huge brown bear appeared suddenly from a thicket and charged him. Being of a less vigorous type, perhaps, than you or Mr. McQuirk, he did not attempt to grapple with the bear, but turned and fled. He, too, had no weapons. His sole protection was his fleetness of foot.

"Being of athletic physique and being further inspired by his fear, he was able at first to maintain his lead over the enraged animal. But as he looked back over his shoulder at intervals, he saw presently that the bear was gaining on him. He was running up a mountain slope, according to McClung's own story. It was a barren country which afforded no hiding place of any description. The animal was now almost treading on his heels. Looking back, he saw the black, cavernous mouth and the gleaming fangs. He could feel the hot breath on his neck."

The stranger leaned forward, eying the partners in turn.

"In his extremity, my friends, an inspiration came to him. An inspiration

as simple as it was effective. He turned suddenly, thrust his arm into the animal's gaping mouth, and with the quickness of thought and strength born of despair, grasped the animal's tail and turned him inside out. This naturally had the effect of reversing the creature's action and it departed in the opposite direction at the same terrific speed with which it had previously pursued its intended victim, and presently was lost to view on the remote horizon. Thus, by his extraordinary resourcefulness, McClung was able to save his life."

A momentary silence followed the conclusion of the story. The partners stared at the speaker stonily. In Windy's eyes was a growing respect.

"They buried McClung up in those Alaskan wilds," continued the stranger, extracting another cigarette and tapping it thoughtfully on the table. "Over his grave, his friends erected a tombstone with an inscription whose rough humor was in keeping with his primitive environment.

John William, otherwise known
as Blatherskite McClung.
Born 1840. Died 1900.

But beneath this inscription were these simple but thoroughly expressive words:

Here he lies—as usual.

It was now painfully obvious to both Lonesome and Windy as they digested this anecdote, that the stranger was meeting them on their own ground. The bland self-assurance of the gilded youth was galling. Lonesome arose slowly and leaned upon the table. Windy drew a little closer so that he stood beside the stranger's chair.

"Son," said Lonesome softly, "that bear story is a humdinger. There ain't any question about that. But getting down to brass tacks, I didn't invite you over to-night to swap yarns. You probably guessed that, huh?"

There was a smile on the stranger's face, upturned to the partners. But back of his heavy glasses his blue eyes were watchful.

"I guessed as much," he murmured. "I am at your service, gentlemen. Let us discuss business if you wish. I hope," he added courteously, "that you have not taken offense at anything I have said. It was not so intended, I assure you."

"Lamb," continued Lonesome, disregarding this overture, "let's call a spade a spade. I don't know where you come from, and what your future plans is don't make no difference to me. You don't belong in the Condon country. You spent a large section of to-day in company with the schoolma'am, who happens to be a friend of mine."

"Correct," assented the youth, somewhat puzzled. "From my brief acquaintance with her, I hold the lady in very high esteem. But really, my dear McQuirk, I don't see why you have brought her into the conversation."

"I can illustrate it," said Lonesome gravely, "with one more story. They was five of us who was in the habit of playing poker together." He cast a veiled glance at Windy, who nodded slightly. "We always met at the same place at the same time, and we didn't play with nobody else. One night four of us got together and whilst we was waiting for the fifth, a stranger breezed in and sat down uninvited in the empty chair."

Lonesome surveyed the youth deliberately. "He was a long-legged fellow about your size, and all togged out like a Shasta Daisy. He was wearing riding breeches and shiny boots, and his hair was all marcelled and easy to look at. He was wearing glasses, this dude, and had a habit of grinning like a Wampus cat."

The stranger grinned cheerfully at this description, his teeth gleaming. Windy, unnoticed, was edging closer.

"So when the fifth feller showed up," continued Lonesome, "the stranger was still sitting in the chair. We passed several remarks about it, but he didn't take the hint. So," continued Lonesome, waving his left hand with the thumb down, "I give the feller to my left the high sign, and——"

He paused, and Windy, with the quickness of a striking rattlesnake, kicked the chair from beneath the stranger. Dishes rattled, and the cabin shook with the impact as the gilded youth sat down abruptly and with considerable force, upon the floor.

"And I says to this fifth feller," continued Lonesome, blandly, "'There's your empty chair, partner,' I says. 'Drag it up, and let's start the game.'"

For a long moment, the stranger remained where he sat, an expression of almost ludicrous amazement upon his face. With Windy leaning carelessly against the table, and Lonesome resting his elbows planted on the oilcloth, the pair stared at the youth with an impassive, almost detached air.

"You see," Lonesome explained, "this four-eyed dude I was telling about, had done horned into a game where he didn't belong."

Despite their careless posture, the partners poised for action. But they eyed each other regretfully as the stranger rose smilingly and dusted off his immaculate riding breeches.

"I see," he said, and turned toward the door. Lonesome came around the table and stood beside Windy, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

He felt strangely depressed and somewhat irritated, now that the incident was closed. It had been too easy after all. His first jealous resentment against the youth had ebbed somewhat. As a judge of men, he thought he had discovered beneath the youth's polished superficiality of manner, certain qualities that were evidenced by his square jaw and the cool confidence of those blue eyes behind the heavy glasses. Now the youth was departing, and Lonesome's conscience already was assuring him that this business of browbeating an inoffensive stranger incapable of self-protection was picayune and unworthy.

Windy felt no such qualms. The ethics of the situation worried him not in the least. He was merely following Lonesome's lead in the matter.

The stranger did not depart. He opened the door and threw it wide with a casual motion, and turned back. Lonesome watched him intently. The youth removed his glasses and placed them on the table. He faced the partners again, and Lonesome mentally accorded him tribute for the fact that the humiliation of the previous moment had left his dignity unruffled. He was debonair and his white teeth gleamed again as of old.

It was noticeable only that his blue eyes, no longer magnified by the heavy glasses, were not wide and fishlike in character, but cold and determined.

"It was a good story," he said smiling. "And excellently well told. It reminds me of an incident in my own personal experience. With your permission, I will tell it while the reminder is still fresh."

"Let's have it," said Lonesome generously. "A good story is always worth hearing."

"During my sophomore year in college," said the gilded youth, striking a graceful attitude with his large white hands resting on his well-tailored hips, "I was manager of the glee club. We toured some of the remoter sections of the West and made a one-night appearance in a mining community. The audience was composed mostly of rough, uncultured men. There was one individual in particular who was most obnoxious." He eyed Lonesome appraisingly from head to foot. "He was, perhaps, fifty years of age, somewhat

bald, with a drooping, tawny mustache that failed to hide an utter lack of physical beauty. He had a habit of chewing tobacco and in his own community had the reputation of being quite a rough character. He believed it very thoroughly himself.

"In the proper environment, and with adequate mental training, this person's many good qualities might have found expression. He might even have understood the artistic and educational work we were attempting to do. But as it was, he appeared in the poorest light. During the evening's entertainment, he talked loudly and boisterously and made himself a general nuisance. The manager of the hall attempted several times to quiet him, pointing out that the rights of other people to enjoy themselves unmolested were of greater importance than his own misguided ideas. Finally, the boys appealed to me to deal with the fellow.

"You know," continued the youth confidently, "I had quite a reputation in college as a person who could hold his own in an argument. I was even on the debating team. I went down to this obnoxious person, who was standing in the aisle just as you are standing there. 'I've heard a lot about you this evening,' I told him pleasantly. 'I am glad to have the privilege of meeting you personally. I'm sure we'll get better acquainted.' So I held out my hand like this."

Almost unconsciously, Lonesome extended his hand and the youth's long white fingers closed upon it in a grasp of steel. The stranger's next actions were startling and abrupt. With an incredibly swift motion, he raised Lonesome's arm high and twisted his body beneath it. Bringing the arm down, it was fulcrumed across the stranger's right shoulder. His left arm circled Lonesome's right leg above the knee and the old-timer was swung from his feet as the youth straightened up.

"Observe," explained the youth, "that had he struggled or made the slightest hostile movement, I could have broken his arm. He was completely at my mercy."

The swiftness and unexpectedness of the maneuver had caught Lonesome unprepared. His arm was strained into an unnatural position. Even as the youth had said, he was entirely at the other's mercy.

"So I carried him to the door," continued the youth, walking to the threshold in two swift strides, "and threw him out—like this." Whereupon, without ceremony, he cast Lonesome headlong into the darkness.

"You know," he continued, turning back to Windy, and dusting his hands methodically, "there are times when reason and logic fail and it becomes necessary to meet your opponent on his own terms."

"Son," said Windy earnestly, his black eyes glittering, "you're a danged good gambler. If McQuirk is pleased with your yarn, you're sitting pretty. If he ain't, you'll find they's a whole vast lot of your education has done been neglected."

The stranger said nothing. From his pocket he produced a spotless handkerchief and fell to polishing his glasses as he faced the door.

Both had heard Lonesome grunt audibly as he struck the well-trampled dust of the roadway. They saw him now on the lower step, slapping the dust from his person with his bandanna. This in itself was a good omen, for had Lonesome been enraged, he would have paused not in the order of his coming. Then the old ex-gunfighter entered the room.

With his appearance, it was as though an invisible hand had swept away the tension of the moment. The very walls of the cabin seemed to reflect his genial mood. His seamed and weatherbeaten features, his twinkling blue eyes, and

the curl of his tawny mustache expressed a joyous surprise.

"Lamb," he chuckled, "you're a wolf in sheep's clothing. A fellow who can listen to a yarn like me and Windy told you without losing his temper, and can come back with a good one like you pulled on me, is a lad that can get along in most any crowd. Windy, drag up that chair which you done unceremoniously removed from under this lion tamer. Son, throw your legs under the table, and we'll chin a little."

Seated again, Lonesome beamed across the oilcloth-covered table, and the youth smiled engagingly in return. Even Windy, who had dragged up a box and planted himself at the end of the table, showed by a certain mellowness in his lean and saturnine features that a common bond had been established between the trio.

"Son," said Lonesome genially, "you're handicapped by your looks. So are me and Windy. So we're three of a kind. A while ago I was sold on the notion that I'd ought to run you out of the Condon country. But I've done changed my mind. I can see that you're a young fellow that's anxious to get along. You ain't as soft as you look. On the other hand, me and Windy ain't such horned toads when you get to know us."

"I realized from the first that your instinctive antagonism toward me sprung from misunderstanding," said the youth generously. "When I first heard of you gentlemen, I was particularly anxious to make your acquaintance. I understand your type better, perhaps, than you understand mine. It is only by a trick of fate that I was not reared west of the Rocky Mountains. My father"—he eyed the cigarette smoke contemplatively—"once controlled large holdings along the Snake River."

"Not 'Roaring Lamb' of the Horse Heaven country?" cried Lonesome, beaming anew. "Don't tell me he was your dad."

"The same. You knew him?"

"No, but I've heard of him," said Lonesome. "He sold out to Eastern capitalists before I'd come to the Condon country. Considerable of a man from what I hear tell. Well, I'm danged! Windy, I'm practically a hundred per cent wrong. This lad danged near belongs in the Condon country."

"Where's Roaring Lamb now?" inquired Windy.

"He passed away three years ago," said the youth, gravely. "While I was in college. Due to unwise investments he left no estate. That is why I am here in the Condon country now. I have not yet completed my college course.

"I might have concentrated my activities along the Snake River where my family is still well known. But some of my father's friends might have misunderstood the kind of work I am following. On the other hand, I wanted to work in a region similar to that in which my father spent his manhood. That is why my activities are centered temporarily in this community."

"Lamb," said Windy, his black eyes glittering, "now that we're so friendly and all, and speaking man to man, you got an ungodly habit of mixing in a herd of long-geared conversation in what you're aiming to say. Here and there has popped up a word that I'm prepared to gamble you don't know the meaning of. I'm referring to work. If you and work ain't strangers I ain't entitled to credit. What line of alleged work do you claim to be following?"

"I'm an educator," said the youth solemnly.

"A which?"

"A disseminator of knowledge. A disciple and advocate of learning."

"Hold on," cried Windy, aggrieved. "There you go again. Don't you ride 'em so high, caballero. Talk United

States so me and McQuirk can get your meaning, if any."

"Your inability to grasp my meaning is no reflection on your mentality," said the stranger with a courteous wave of the hand. Not till afterward did the partners realize how adroitly he had avoided a direct answer to the question. "It is a product of your environment, and your limited opportunities. It is the very thing that I'm striving to better in my own feeble way. I am striving to break down the ancient fallacy that you good people out here on the last frontier have no time to turn your thoughts to other things." The youth's voice had grown more suave and sonorous. "Culture is not a question of geography. It is a matter of personal inclination."

"Yes, indeed," murmured Windy, temporarily giving up the struggle. "Sounds reasonable, don't it, McQuirk?"

"For example," continued the stranger, fixing an intent eye on Windy, "you have lived a life of action here in the plains. Your days have been crowded with physical activity. No doubt in your connection with the cattle industry, you have spent days and nights continuously in the saddle. Your hours of rest and relaxation have been few. You have had no time to meditate on the higher things of life. Yet even in your active life where spectacular incidents and lurid enterprise have followed in rapid succession, there have been rare moments as you lay alone with your thoughts beneath the stars when you have wondered vaguely what undiscovered realms lay beyond the mountains."

"That's an easy one," averred Windy, returning again to the attack. "East is the Blue Mountains and past them is the Rockies. And then comes the Bad Lands and the Black Hills. They ain't nothing mysterious about that. Notwithstanding that me and McQuirk aims to roost pretty permanent here in the Condon country, we've been around a little. We ain't got no hankering for them other places. It suits us fine here. We ain't what you call boosters, but we figure like that feller you read about, 'Whichever way you go from here, it's worse.'"

"You do not grasp my meaning," the stranger pointed out. "As the old philosophers of the East have said——"

"Listen," Windy cut in. "That East is East and West is West stuff is all bunk. I was heading East once and when I come to the Dakotas, the young fellows was all talking about going out West when they'd made a stake. And when I was in Chicago, I talked to a hombre who had some relatives away out West in the Dakotas. And in New York, a feller in a cigar stand told me his wife's cousin ran a pool hall out West. And where do you suppose he meant? In Pittsburgh, by gravy. No, sir, I've come to the conclusion that this East and West idea is haywire. You get the same brand of beans at Childs as you do at 'One-lung's' at Frisco. The hat I'm wearing was made at Danbury and the beefsteak the stevedores eat at Hoboken was raised west of the Mississippi."

"You insist on speaking geographically," the stranger protested. "You are speaking of the concrete. I refer to the abstract. My reference to the realm beyond the mountains was merely a figure of speech. What I'm attempting to say is, that the very harshness of your environment and life has denied to you whole worlds of art and ethics and philosophy and whole ages of history more interesting and educational, more eloquent and inspiring, than the mundane details of routine existence. Do you follow me?"

"At a considerable distance," murmured Windy. "But continue, son, continue."

"For instance," said the stranger im-

pressively, "Homer's immortal epic, The Iliad, has inspired the hearts of thousands with its stirring record of valor and courage. Yet I am prepared to wager that you have never even heard of Helen of Troy."

"You win," agreed Windy cheerfully. "I've been in Troy at that. It was in late fall. A sleet storm was raging at the time. But I didn't see Helen."

"I am not referring to Troy, New York," said the stranger somewhat coldly. "The legendary Troy, of which Homer wrote so vigorously and so beautifully, existed some thousands of years ago."

"That was before my time," said Windy, his mustache bristling. "You hadn't ought to have pulled a whizzer like that on me."

"Who was Hannibal?" The stranger pointed an accusing finger. "Anthony and Cleopatra? Nero? Archimedes?"

"You got me," confessed the badgered Windy. "I ain't got any use for them foreigners, anyway. Question is, what's all this got to do with the price of beef?"

Lonesome, who had been listening with great respect to the stranger's utterance, squirmed uneasily and eyed his partner with disapproval. "Give the lad a chance, old-timer. Can't you see he's trying to teach us ignorant mavericks a thing or two? Get a hold of your alleged humor for a minute or two whilst he's giving us an earful."

"I was merely attempting to point out some of the things that you have missed in your active career," said the stranger with dignity. "Men should not blind themselves to facts of evolution and history, the processes through which our present civilization has been attained. Crowded with action as your life has been, you realize, of course, that educationally your progress has been somewhat retarded. Like all normal men of your type, I am assuming that you think somewhat wistfully at times of the pages that have been closed to you."

"Oh, sure," said Windy generously. "Don't get the idea I'm trying to cramp your style. I ain't the kind of a feller that won't listen when he's told something he don't know. Only thing is, you got a bad habit of tearing the clouds apart in hunks. If you bust your jaw on some of them big words you use, don't you expect no sympathy from me. Get going, son. Unlimber your artillery."

Thus encouraged, the stranger launched forth upon a vast sea of knowledge, concerning whose very existence the hard-bitten old-timers were only vaguely aware. They listened, spellbound, while he flitted through the fields of literature, came to grips with philosophy, and dabbled in art. He sprinted nimbly through three thousand years of recorded history, waxing eloquent on the glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome, spoke in hushed tones of the Egypt of the Pharaohs. Under the spell of his hypnotic voice, empires rose and fell, whole races of people lived, thrived, and passed away. It was a concentrated array of facts that left Lonesome dazed and blinking.

From history, he turned to literature and the arts. He quoted Shakespeare at length, mentioned the philosophy of Spencer, Nietzsche, and Kant. Presently, the gilded youth, drawing upon his vast reservoirs of knowledge, was quoting the height of Mount Everest, the dimensions of the pyramid of Cheops and the geographical location of the Sargasso Sea. Later he had ranged farther afield and, attaching himself like the tail of a comet to Newton's hypothesis, was soaring among the planets and entering in an explanation of the mysteries of interstellar space.

The evening was full grown when he paused for breath. The witching hour of midnight was at hand. Uplifted by

his own eloquence, the stranger sat, wrapped in somber thought. Lonesome was somewhat bewildered as though the army of facts had overwhelmed him and beaten him into the dust.

The silence that had stolen upon and enveloped the cabin was profaned suddenly by a loud snore from Windy. Lonesome started and eyed his partner guiltily. The stranger, too, emerged from his contemplative trance and fixed a frosty and accusing eye on the sleeping one.

Windy's head was bowed on his arm. His lean body sagged against the table in an attitude of repose. Even as they watched, his shoulders twitched, a tremor shook his body, and he snored again, more loudly and vigorously than before.

Much embarrassed, Lonesome extended his foot furtively beneath the table and kicked the sleeper sharply on the shin. Windy sat bolt upright and blinked at the pair.

"Who kicked me?" he demanded. "I wasn't asleep. Just you keep right on, Lamb. I agree with everything you done said. I couldn't have put it no better myself."

"You was, too, asleep," said Lonesome reproachfully. "You was snoring so loud we couldn't talk no more. You'd ought to be ashamed of yourself, DeLong."

"I was unconscious," Windy insisted. "I wasn't asleep. I was what you might call paralyzed. And it wasn't no snore you heard. It was a groan. He give me too big a dose at once. I wasn't used to it. It's like feeding a feller roast duck and champagne when he's been in the habit of living exclusive on beans and near beer.

"Point is," he continued, turning upon the gilded stranger, "you sure are an optimist if you expect me and McQuirk to make up for fifty years of blissful ignorance in one evening. Don't get the idea I don't appreciate what you have been telling us, you understand. But I got a hunch we can struggle along for another fifty years as blissful and dumb as before. That is, providing we don't have to worry too much about why Rome fell or how much sand they is in the Sahara desert."

"That's where you're wrong, my friend," said the stranger. "A man is never too old to learn. One should constantly strive for self-improvement. In your particular case, there are other reasons why you should continually strive to add to your fund of information. The school-teacher informed me that you are a director of the local school district. This fact presupposes a general interest in the subject of educational work."

"On top of that, Windy," Lonesome pointed out, coming to the defense of their visitor, "you ain't going to get by with Barney and Tim much longer less you're able to answer the general run of questions they put up to you. Them two lads is growing up and one of these days they're liable to tumble to the fact that old Windy DeLong is considerable of a man from the neck down. But above that, he's a total loss."

This was a weighty argument that impressed itself even upon Windy's belligerent mood. The Widow Hogan and her two boys, Barney and Tim, aged ten and eight respectively, were a trio whom he held in high esteem.

"You're right at that," he conceded. "They pull a sneaky one on me every once in a while. Riding by from school the other day, Barney asked me what a split infinitive was. I told him it sounded to me like a forked carrot, or something like that, and he give me the royal horse laugh. Right now I don't know what breed of animal it is."

"They's times when I'm talking to the schoolma'am," Lonesome confessed in turn, "when I feel as intelligent as a horned toad. She knows so danged much about things I don't know nothing

about, that sometimes I get plumb discouraged."

"Question is," said Windy, "what's to be done about it? You're full of good ideas, Lamb. Maybe you can answer this one. Admitting that we're flea-bitten mavericks who crave to be the real beef, how in blazes can we soak up this said learning? We're too old to go to school now. It's too much to expect that educated buzzards like you will drop in on us often. No, sir, it can't be done. Dumb as we are, I figger we've got to grin and bear it."

"On the contrary," said the stranger easily, "it is quite a simple matter. At first glance it would seem that you men whose lives are spent so far from centers of learning would find it impossible to bridge the gap of years and environment. For instance, if you should attempt to purchase all the books from which I have quoted this evening, it would cost you a small fortune. And to read them all would be a slow and laborious process.

"In my research along educational lines, I encountered this problem. I finally made an important discovery. For your benefit, I will pass it along." His voice was very casual. "I've discovered that an enterprising publisher, the Hodge-Dobkins Company, has gathered together in one volume a most astonishing array of condensed information. It is called The Twentieth Century Compendium of Universal Facts. It costs fifteen dollars." He drew forth his cigarette case and extracted a cigarette. He lighted it and threw away the match, and took up his cap.

"I recommend this volume to your serious consideration. It contains an enormous array of data simply told, on a tremendous variety of subjects. With this volume at hand, you need never apologize for your lack of information, since the essential facts, simply told, would be at your command. Well, I must be pushing on." He rose to his feet and smiled genially upon the two. "This has been a thoroughly enjoyable evening."

"Wait a second," said Windy. "This aggregation of facts you were speaking about. Fifteen dollars is pretty steep for one book, ain't it? A feller can buy a lot of chewing tobacco for fifteen dollars."

"The average college course in liberal arts costs the undergraduate twelve hundred dollars per year," said the stranger, "or a total of forty-eight hundred dollars for a four-year course. Yet your average college man, upon graduation, will not have mastered more than a third of the facts contained in this volume."

"How can we get a hold of this said book?" inquired Lonesome. "I'll gamble the drug store up to Condon don't carry it."

The stranger appeared to hesitate over this question, but very briefly. "I'll put in your order for it myself," he said generously. "I'll be glad to do it. Then you'll be sure to get it. The fact is"—he fumbled in his pocket and produced a sheaf of papers—"I happen to have an order blank with me."

He seated himself again, drew forth a fountain pen and wrote busily.

"Sign here," he directed. Each of the partners affixed his scrawling signature to the printed form.

Methodically, the stranger detached the sheet from the tablet. A carbon paper was disclosed underneath and the carbon copy he also detached and pushed across the table.

"That is your receipt," he said, and paused, gathering up his papers.

"Dig down, DeLong," said Lonesome hastily. "Kick through with seven fifty. Them fellows has got to be paid for the book, don't they?"

"It is—er—customary," agreed the stranger.

From their respective wallets, the

partners produced the required amount, which the stranger pocketed and once more reached for his cap.

"Much obliged for your trouble," said Lonesome.

"No trouble at all, Mr. McQuirk, I assure you. I am glad to be of service to you gentlemen, and there are no thanks due me."

They followed him outside into the glory of the moonlight night and watched him in silence as he mounted his horse. From the saddle, he looked down upon them smilingly, his white teeth gleaming.

"I owe you an apology, Mr. McQuirk. To-day, up on Shuttler's Flats, when you suggested I call upon you to-night on business, the idea struck me as amusing, but I should not have laughed, since you and Mr. DeLong have aided me very materially. The fact that Mr. DeLong is a school director will have considerable weight in the community. Your order, too, Mr. McQuirk, should help me with the school-teacher. She is the hardest prospect I have encountered."

"I don't get you," said Lonesome, paling a little beneath the tan. Perhaps due to the chillness of the night air, or the sincere but puzzling gratitude in the stranger's voice, the spell of the preceding hour seemed to be breaking. "What's this about you and the schoolma'am? What *is* your line of business?"

"Why," said the youth in some surprise, "I am the representative of the Hodge-Dobkins Company in this territory. I've been trying for two or three days to sell a copy of the Compendium to the school-teacher, but without success. It is essential that her name be on the list as this fact would influence the parents of the school children. The lady has a keen intellect, and the ordinary arguments do not convince her. But the fact that you gentlemen are customers will probably be helpful, since she holds you both in very high esteem."

"A book agent," breathed Lonesome.

"A salesman," corrected the stranger, smilingly. "Gentlemen, I thank you for a pleasant and profitable evening. Good night."

He waved them a genial farewell and rode away, the slanting moonlight reflecting from the satin flanks of his gleaming thoroughbred and his own glistening boots.

The partners stood in silence and watched him fade into the distance, and presently the sound of his progress was lost in the cañon.

Then they turned slowly and faced each other. Lonesome started and his ears burned as he discovered that Windy's malignant and glittering eyes were fixed upon him.

"I've seen too many good words massacred to-night, McQuirk," said that worthy gloomily. "I ain't got the heart to tell you what I think of this business. One perfectly swell evening ruined. But that don't matter." His voice was bitter. "Oh, my, no. You needed help to handle this critter, did you? Yeah, and he heaved you out on your ear, and you liked it. You pet him on the back and kowtowed to him, and treated him like he was tophand in a royal flush. And what does this educated lizard turn out to be? A book agent, by gravy!"

"You kicked through with half the ante yourself," Lonesome pointed out. "Don't you get heavy with me, DeLong. I kind of cotton to that there snake charmer. You got to admit he knows his stuff. It's been a long time since anybody took a fall out of us. But say, old-timer, wouldn't he have made a humdinger of a buckaroo?"

From afar off, they could hear the stranger's voice raised in song, muted by distance to a frail and tiny echo, a well-trained baritone that rose and soared as though the owner thereof was

somehow akin to the moon-bathed pinnacles and the whispering sage, and the stars.

"DeLong," said Lonesome softly, reaching for his plug of tobacco, "will you listen to that wolf howl? I've done received gobs of education to-night." He shook his head thoughtfully as his teeth sank into the weed. "And his name is Lamb."

"Blah," bleated Windy raucously. "Us two woolly sheep had best sneak back into the corral whilst we still got our hides left, McQuirk."

MONTANA AIR AGAINST CALIFORNIA AIR

THREE years ago I was in a hotel in Los Angeles one night, when one of those bombastic real-estate agents was telling a bunch of us about the wonderful air and climatic conditions in southern California. He claimed it was the only country in the world where a man could pay $2,500.00 per acre for land and make a living from it, and the air would make you feel like a new person. I listened to him for quite a while, and I asked him if he ever was in Montana, and he said, "No," and he never would be, unless he was brought in there with shackles on him. I told him if he never was in Montana that his lungs were never full of pure air in his life.

I told him one time I left Pocatello, Idaho, for Butte; and there was a man with tuberculosis on the train. As we climbed up the main range of the Rocky Mountains on the Idaho side, this fellow began to get pretty pale; and, since the air was not as good on the Idaho side as on the Montana side, he died. They could not take him off of the train until we arrived in Butte, the next morning; and he was right across from my berth. They had telephoned for an undertaker to come down and get him. As we were leaving the car, the curtains opened at his berth, and he stuck his head out. He wanted to know from the porter, why the devil he hadn't called him. During the night the Montana air resurrected the dead.

Trouble Trail

By George Owen Baxter

Author of "Bad Man's Gulch," etc.

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters

HUNTED by Sheriff "Wally" Ops, Larry Dickon, outlaw, crosses the desert with his pet mare, Cherry Pie. At a water hole the mare is stolen by "Doctor" Grace and his gang of thugs, and Larry is left to the tender mercies of the desert. Killing one of the Doctor's men, Larry manages to recover Cherry Pie, only to be caught between the Doctor and his men and the sheriff and his.

Cherry Pie climbs a well-nigh unscalable cliff, and Larry leaves the Doctor and the sheriff to fight it out between them. Resolved upon revenge, Larry goes to the sheriff's house. After temporarily disabling Danny Murphy, who has come to see the sheriff's daughter, Larry succeeds in meeting Julie Ops. Two minutes later he finds himself looking down the barrel of his own gun.

Wresting the gun from her grasp he leaves, only to discover—with the help of his old friend Choctaw—that he is in love with her. He rides himself ragged trying to forget, has another fight with Grace and his men, but finally returns. In the meantime Choctaw has told Julie Ops that Larry and her father will kill each other unless she sends Larry away.

CHAPTER XVI.

"TAKE HIM ALIVE!"

WHEN I come down out of the north at last, I was pretty sure that I had beat the guessing of everybody that was interested in where I might go or what I might do. I thought that I would have a clear stretch before me to the house of Wally Ops. Somewhere behind me was Doctor Grace, raving on my trail and, I thought, pretty sure to miss it. He would think that when I went north I was trying to run away from him. And to the north, too, there would be the folks getting ready to hunt me through the mountains as I come along. The sheriff, I figured, would be clean away from my track; and so I didn't have much worry on me.

You can judge for yourself, then, that I was tolerable mad when I got through the Windover Pass and, stopping Cherry for a breath of air and a rest, heard the

clinking of hoofs come up the gorge behind me.

I left Cherry with her cinches loosened, breathing a bit and snatching at a few mouthfuls of grass, while I ran back to the next turn and looked down the trail; and there, by confounded luck, I seen fifteen riders, with their horses polished by sweat until they looked like iron statues in action, with the sun flashing on them and the dust going up like steam.

You will say that fifteen mean more than one. But not when the one is the sort of a gent that was riding at the head of that gang. He was made low and broad, with long legs, so that he fitted onto the back of a horse as neat and as strong as a clothespin onto a small rope; and he had a sombrero with a limp brim that flapped up and down across his eyes. He looked like any old desert rat, at a mite of distance; but he was riding a whacking good horse, and the way of his riding was familiar to me. Most punchers let a horse ramble on a loose rein; but this gent kept a tight hand, and he always seemed to be sort of lifting his horse along over the road, and picking out the best spots, and studying every inch of the way.

So I knew by the first glance that this was Wally Ops. And of all the men that ever rode down my trail, there was none that I feared so much as him. Because he was like a crossbreed between bulldog and greyhound.

I went back to Cherry and cinched her up again, while she turned her head and watched me in a hurt sort of a way, as if she knew that she had done enough work for that day, and so it was time to rest. But that was always the way. When other riders came at me, I had Cherry Pie fresh and ready; and we frisked away from them like nothing at all. But when Ops showed up, there was sure to be a tired mare under me. However, we had the whole length of Windover Valley ahead of us, and I made sure that even a tired Cherry would be better than the best that the sheriff could have with him.

And she was. She went floating down the valley; and behind me, pretty soon, I seen the sheriff and his men streaming out like a flag blown ragged by the wind of their own galloping. They fought hard to get at me, but the nearest that they could come was long rifle range; and if that's dangerous, then there ain't nothing in a road agent's life that can be called safe.

It was the bright time of the early morning when we started that ride. It was noon when I pulled out from Windover Valley, with the sheriff and his gang dead beat behind me; but over to the left I seen riders come crashing through a dust cloud into the foot of the valley; and through the dust cloud I could see that there was more horses than men. Something told me, then, that the sheriff had managed to get word ahead of him, in some manner, and that these was gents coming down with fresh mounts for the posse. Darn the telephone, I say. Electricity, it sure has made life hard.

Well, what was I to do? Press straight ahead and get as much of a start as I could, and hope for some way of blinding my trail for them? Well, in those smooth, rounding hills, with plenty of soft surface dirt, you couldn't hide a trail from microscope eyes like those of the sheriff. No, there was no hope of that.

In the next hollow there was a muddy stream running along. I dismounted and stripped the saddle from the back of Cherry, and I began to slosh the water over her. She was so hot that her coat steamed. But pretty soon she cooled down a good deal, and the pain went out of her eyes, and she began to reach for the green fringe of grasses that growed along the bank of the stream.

When she done that, I started right

along, because I knew that she had had enough cooling.

There was three miles of steep climbing and soft dirt for a trail ahead of me. And my hope was that even Wally Ops, when he got his men to this place, wouldn't be able to keep them from rushing the rise of ground, because, on their fresh horses, they would feel as though they could eat me right up. If they charged that slope, and tried to gallop uphill through that soft dirt, they was about done for, by my way of figuring.

In the meantime, I had to save Cherry.

Heaven had given me strength all over my body, and too much in the hands. But hands and feet and legs and back all had to work, now. I made up my mind that I would carry that heavy range saddle and the guns and the pack and all to the top of that rise. I hit it at a dog trot, the same way that Indians do; and, like an Indian, I put the saddle on the top of my head.

Did you ever try to handle a range saddle like a pack? It's heavy, to begin with; but, worse than that, it's made awkward. It always wants to slide the wrong way; and I was tripping and stumbling all the time, with first one stirrup and then the next getting between my legs.

Cherry, you would of laughed to of seen her! She thought that I was crazy. She ran after me and sniffed at me, to make sure that I was her boss, just the same as usual. She nipped at my shoulder. And then she went and stood in my path until I beat her out of it. But finally she just walked along beside me, nickering now and then, and trying to get used to me.

Poor Cherry! There was always something new for her to try to understand about her boss!

Well, that was as killing work as I ever did, with my feet slipping back one foot for every two that I went ahead, and my shoes driving ankle deep in the soft sand. The dust even of my own going came chugging up into my face, and filling my throat, and drifting like grit down my back, and mixing with the sweat on my forehead, and running down into my eyes. And then the dangling stirrup leathers kept getting between my legs and tripping me up. Something was always falling from the pack. And what with the heat of the sun baking me, and a wind smashing at me now and ag'in—I should say that that was three miles of torture. But all that time I was resting my mare; and Cherry was coming back to herself with every step that she made.

I got over two mile of that grade; and I was sick and blind when I turned around and seen the posse stream across the valley floor and hit the trail behind me. Yes, they come at a gallop, waving their hands, eager to eat me up. No matter how eager, they couldn't gallop all the way after me.

Cherry heard them and saw them, and she flattened her ears along her neck. She was used to being chased; she loved nothing better; and it always made her a little mad when any other horse dared to think that it could catch up with her.

I will tell you how bad and how mean and how slippery and sandy that slope was, when I say that though they was spurring and beating their hosses along behind me, and getting in each other's way, and raving and yelling like buzzards behind me, still I had time to cover the next mile before they got within striking distance.

I had done what I set out to do. I had climbed up the whole three miles of that slope, carrying the saddle and the pack and letting my mare get back her strength; but it near killed me. And when I tried to swing the saddle onto the back of Cherry, it just slipped out of my hands; and I would of fallen and not been able to get up if I hadn't blundered blind against Cherry. I held my

arms around her neck until my head cleared a little.

Then I saddled her, my hands trembling terrible, and the blood rushing in waves behind my eyes and trying to press them out of my head, and blackness circling and swinging around in front of me.

I saddled her, with the sheriff's men coming lunging for me up the slope. There was a couple of shots fired, but then I heard somebody's voice squeaking from the rear:

"Don't shoot! We'll take him alive!"

That was Wally Ops! It made me so mad that my head cleared up right away. I jerked the cinches home and snapped into the saddle. As I went over the crest, I looked back to the posse.

They was all riding hard and fast. They was all pressing their horses for a gallop, and getting not much more than a walk; and I seen the horses shaking their heads and the foam flying from their bridles; and I seen them lowering their heads, in spite of the sand and the dust that they snuffed in.

Somehow, by the steaming and the reeking and the staggering of that whole outfit, I knew that they was beat—that they was entire beat—and when they got to the down slope they would see what the mare could do with them!

There was only one exception. Away off to the rear come Wally Ops, and the little devil was walking, the same as I had done, except that he wasn't carrying the saddle, of course; and he was leading a whacking fine-looking big gray horse. Right then and there I smelled trouble!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GRAY FOLLOWS.

WHY, what happened when we went down the slope was just what I expected. Those boys had rode most half the day to get me, and they had used up one set of horses, and they knew that my mare hadn't been freshed when they begun running me in the morning. So it didn't seem less than right that, with their new mounts, they should gallop right over me. They forgot that you can kill a horse with a three-mile sprint just as well as you can by a fifty-mile gallop.

I went down the slope with Cherry running like a sailing hawk. When I looked back, I seen the posse come over the crest; and, when they hit the down slope and used their spurs, those horses staggered like they was drunk. One went down, and throwed its rider about a mile into the air.

I laughed and called Cherry Pie back a notch. I didn't think that there was any use in her killing herself off for the sake of that bunch. And I couldn't help leaning back and brushing the sand off of her hips and quarters and then off of her all over, so that they would be able to see her shining like gold and silver as she walked away from them across that desert.

I knew that before the night come there would be gents that would swear my mare wasn't natural flesh and blood, and there would be a lot more of them that would be willing to pay down her weight in gold and diamonds for the sake of owning her.

However, that posse was a ruined lot of fools before they got to the bottom of that incline. As they come down, stopping every step, and their poor, tired nags going up and down like rocking horses, without getting ahead, I seen Wally Ops come striding through them on the gray. He looked fine; and his hoss looked fine and fresh; and beside him, out of the rear, there rode three other gents that had saved their mounts a little on that killing slope.

Well, four was better to handle than fifteen. But, when I seen the look of this gang, I couldn't help reaching for my rifle, because they looked extremely like business.

I steadied my Cherry Pie to her work, and I started riding her to save inches and ounces. There was no use waiting until she was beat before I started to lighten her. I chucked away my whole pack; I cut away my saddlebags. I throwed off my cartridge belt. I stripped away all that I had except the saddle and the rifle and one revolver, with the bullets that was in those guns.

I couldn't tell any difference in the stride of the mare, after she was lightened by those pounds. I looked back and hoped that the boys in the rear would stop to scoop in the plunder, but they didn't.

They rode right on past it—past my slicker and all my pack and those fine, shiny new guns, lying one after another in the dirt. So that even while I was riding away from them for my life, I couldn't help admiring in my heart of hearts the way that the sheriff was able to get together such first-rate men, and how he could teach them the rules of the game. I had had enough experience with posses to know what fools they can be.

For these four come on, not riding in a huddle, where the dust of one would bother the other, but spread out, maybe a dozen yards or more between each one; and, for that reason, looking more fine and formidable by a lot. They was four picked men. Each one of them was a handful, and each of them was riding on a picked horse that had stood up under the grind.

They worked those horses for a solid hour, and for an hour I jockeyed my Cherry along, waiting for the time when her head would begin to come up a little, and waiting for the time when her hoofs would begin to pound.

No, she didn't pound! Her gallop was as light as a bird skimming along; but by the stretch and the strain of her neck, and by something that come quivering up to me along the reins, I knew that Cherry was running with her heart and her nerves more than with her strength.

It turned me sort of wild to think that she was killing herself for my sake. I turned in the saddle, and I yelled at those gents behind me and raged at them. Then I turned back and rode Cherry with all the wits that I had in me, studying the trail, when there was a trail, looking for the easiest grades, when we come to the hills again, and always fighting and working. And—though goodness knows how she managed to do it—she kept them off.

When I looked back again, I could see them doing what I had done before—cutting away everything, and stripping their horses to the quick, except for a gun or two apiece.

If they had done that when I did it, there would of been an end to me five miles back; but now I sort of hoped that it would be too late.

It was too late for three of them. Besides the sheriff's horse, there was a brown, a blue roan, and a fine young bay. The brown went first, jerked back bit by bit, as though somebody had a line hitched onto him and was pulling him back. And then we hit a rise in the ground, and the bay crumpled and lay dying on the ground; and the roan curled up, too, and stood with braced legs and with hanging head.

But still Wally Ops came on after me. I couldn't believe it, really. I looked back, and I looked again. Because it wasn't, you might say, in the rules of the game for Wally Ops to ride along after me like this, when he had no more men with him.

What could he gain? He wasn't as young as he might be; but, young or old, there was never a day when he could of stood up to me, and he should of knowed it. He did know it, I suppose, except that he was wild and raging to get at me.

The three were stopped. And, as we got into a nest of rocks, I seen that

Cherry was spent and done for. The gray had her beat complete. There was nothing for it except to take Wally Ops or let him take me. And I made up my mind that I would let the world have a dead sheriff in a few minutes.

I swung Cherry in behind a stone as big as a cottage, and, fagged as she was, she answered the bridle as light and as quick and as true as though I had just rode her out from the barn on that morning. As I jumped out of the saddle, I gave her one look.

Would she live, or would she die? Well, I didn't know. There was that in her eye told me that she was gunna die; there was that in her eye that told me maybe she would live. But I can tell you that when I seen the deadness in those eyes of hers I wanted to tear the sheriff and all of his gang to pieces and feed them to the dogs, bit by bit; and I run and got into a niche of the rocks from which I could fill Wally Ops full of lead.

I heard the gallop of his gray coming, and I knew that I had stopped just in time; for that gallop was pounding, but still there was lots of strength in it. It would of been a finish for Cherry, if we had kept on. Somehow, it was better for her to stop while she was still ahead, and to feel that she was a winner, even if she had to die for it.

Yet, as the gray swung along closer, I wondered what the sheriff could be thinking about to ride right at a bunch of rocks like that, where a hundred gents might be hiding from him—and to ride on, too, when he must have noticed that the noise of Cherry's hoofs had stopped.

But then I seen the sheriff coming, and I knew how it was. That ride had been a hard one for me, with only myself and my horse to think about; but the sheriff had had in hand, all of that day, himself and fifteen men besides. He had had to think and talk for them and to them, and cuss them and praise them and keep them working together—until finally he had seen four of them riding me down. And still I had got away; and here he was alone.

Why, it had drove him sort of mad; and he come busting down the trail with his mouth a little open and the lips grinned back and the wobbly brim of his sombrero going up and down and his pale-blue eyes all bloodshot and staring. I don't seem to get a hold on the words that can tell you what Wally Ops was like when he come rushing along up that trail; but he looked like a gent that is chasing a ghost.

And, somehow, shooting from behind a rock wouldn't do. There was only one to fight, and I never used no advantages against one man. So I sidestepped into the open and covered him with my revolver and hollered to him to pull up.

Pull up? That little fool, he gave a screech like a wild beast, and he swung his gray hoss around, and he whanged out two long Colt's shoot. I say he made a double draw—and me standing there with a bead drawed on him!

I hated to do it. It was a good hoss, that gray—tall and made for carrying weight, and fast and clean-winded, as I had seen proved that day. He would of been just the thing to take along and pair with Cherry, him carrying the packs and her carrying me.

But it was either the horse or the man; and, though I was filled with a terrible wish to kill Wally Ops, somehow it cut deep to kill the father of Julie. I shot the gray horse straight through the brains, and Wally went down with a crash into the dust, both of his guns roaring.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TWO MEN AND A HORSE.

I PICKED Wally out of the dust and yanked the guns out of his hands. The little fool drawed a knife and tackled me with that, and I barely dodged the cut of it.

"Now, I'll tear you in two, Wally," I told him. "Are you crazy, man?"

He seemed to come to himself, little by little, looking at me and at my gun. He threw his knife away and wiped the dirt and the sweat from his forehead.

"I've lost!" said Wally. "I've lost again!"

And he seemed to sag all over until he seen the mare; and he said: "My gosh, Dickon! Cherry Pie is dying!"

She looked it. She sure looked as though she was dying, standing there with her head dropped and her eyes glassy and the sweat dropping off of her.

"Stand here, Ops," I told the sheriff, feeling blacker and meaner than I ever felt in my life before. "If Cherry dies, you and me are gunna fight it out; and I'm gunna kill you for the sake of this day's work."

He was a queer one, that Wally Ops was.

He just said: "You talk like a fool! Are you gunna stand here and let Cherry die?" And he run to her and begun to rub her down.

There was sense in that. He took one side of her and I took the other, and we whipped the sweat off of her. Then I dug into her muscles and stripped them down, and I felt how flabby and weak they were under the tips of my fingers.

We worked for a whole hour, until Wally was groaning with agony, every stroke he give, he had worked so hard. "Now lead her up and down!" says Wally. "She's getting cold!"

She was, too, and trembling; and still her head was down. She stood there, free from bit and saddle, the same as she was the first day that I seen her on the desert, which was the beginning of the ten months that I hunted her. It seemed right that now she should die free.

"You fool," sings out Wally Ops, "are you gunna stand there blubbering while she dies? Can't you talk to her? Can't you persuade her into walking?"

I stood off and called to her; and she tried to come to me—and come staggering, with her knees bending.

Wally stood by crying like a baby and saying, "D-d-dog-gone it, how she l-l-loves you, Larry!"

But I walked up and down, calling to her; and she followed me, reeling every step and dying on her feet. It was the dusk of the day, with the stars coming out to watch us, in twos and threes. I looked up to them; and I sort of said in my heart, "God, if you let Cherry live, I'll be a better man by a lot, from this time onwards!"

Not that I would be called a praying man or superstitious—but who can tell what happened? All I know is that Cherry begun to pull together a little; and pretty soon her head was right at my shoulder as I walked her up and down.

Wally took the saddle blankets and our coats, and we blanketed her up. So we went on for another hour, rubbing her down and walking her and rubbing her down again. And finally her head come up a little, and she breathed more free and steady, and her knees seemed to gather under her, and her muscles was firmer to the touch.

We bedded her down with soft brush, and I made her lie there. Then we went off to get water; and while we was finding it I could hear Cherry Pie nickering for me, but not strong enough to get up and follow. We found water, and we brung back two canteens of it and two hats full, and we poured it down her throat, with Wally Ops laughing to see how she could drink out of a bottle just the same as any man. The water done her a tremendous lot of good.

She should of died, as Wally and me both agreed, but she didn't. Along about midnight, while we sat watching, she made an effort; and then she got up, and pretty soon she was picking at

the grass. And so I knew that by the morning she would be almost as good as well.

I stretched out my hand and found Wally's, and I pressed it because there was no words that I could find handy, and no words was needed, him being an understanding man.

After a while I said: "You better go back and find your boys, Wally. They'll be messing around and looking for you, and you better go back to them. But if you was to take so much time that you didn't locate them until about noon to-morrow, I would appreciate it a lot."

"By rights," said Wally, "I should be a dead man, Larry."

"By rights," said I, "Cherry Pie should be a dead mare; but she ain't—and that's owing to your help, because I never could of brought her through alone. All accounts is squared and wrote off between us. You go back and start the chase again, whenever you want. Except that the next time you come I'm gunna start shooting, Ops; and I'm gunna shoot to kill."

"Bah!" says Wally Ops. "Maybe you would think to scare me away from your trail, Dickon?"

A mean little man was that same sheriff, standing there in the starshine, with his hands gripped at his sides. But I couldn't help admiring him and wondering at him, because fear was a thing that he knowed nothing whatever about. Well, I watched Wally walking off into the night, with a sort of a feeling that of all the gents in the world the only two that was honest enough for me to want them as partners was Choctaw, which was a lot too old for the work—and the sheriff, whose business was to find me and land me in jail or in a grave.

However, I knew that there wouldn't be any need of worrying until the middle of the next day, because the sheriff would never let the boys come onto my trail again until the time that I had mentioned. So I used all of those hours letting Cherry rest.

She was made of whalebone and fire; and so, even by the morning, her eyes seemed bright, and there was no sign of the terrible work she had done the day before except for her being kind of gaunt. But she wasn't stiff. No, she was as supple as ever. Every inch of that horse was game.

About this here run of Cherry's, I dunno that the distances was all charted down exact. There is some that say that she done a hundred and thirty-five miles. And there was others that rounded off the figures, so that to this day you will run across folks that will swear that Cherry Pie did a hundred and fifty miles.

Altogether, I know that they're wrong. I have rode over that ground myself other times; and I should say that between the time she started traveling in the dawn of the day to the time when she finished off among the rocks, she done about a hundred and twenty-five miles. Other horses have done more distance, I know; but the thing that made Cherry's run so great was that she was taken up by two fresh sets of horses and run across rough country, and that she beat them all off except one, and that horse was one of the finest animals in the mountains, as I heard afterwards. He had good blood, besides which he had been hardened to mountain running all of his life. But, even so, if the sheriff hadn't been a lot lighter man than me, Cherry would of killed them all off.

Of the horses that followed us on those two runs down Windover Valley and then out of the valley and up the sand slide and across the desert beyond, there was used, altogether, thirty-four animals. Most of them were of mighty good quality. Of those thirty-four, five was rode to death, and dropped dead under their riders or right afterwards;

and three more was staved up so bad that they was of no account ever afterwards.

As for Cherry, I have told you how close she come to dying. But the very next day I could of rode her. Which is something that most folks won't believe. But I put the saddle on her back, and I made a ten-mile march, leading her into the mountains for a good place to rest up. She finished up that ten-mile march as free and as frisky as you please.

There was a little stretch of maybe ten acres among the hills; and there I kept Cherry Pie and let her get strong, with sun-cured bunch grass to eat, than which nothing is so good for a hoss. There was plenty of the finest soft water for her to drink and good shade and no flies for the middle of the day to bother her.

Two days I kept her there. All that time I was on the lookout for trouble, but I wasn't bothered. The reason was that when the sheriff went back to the posse he found that they was tired of chasing me. They said that the mare had wings, and, until they had the same sort of flyers to ride, they would never take my trail again.

However, Wally Ops was as set as ever on getting me, or more set. He went back to town, had the State and the county pay the price of the dead horses and the cost of the posse, and then he got together another little bunch of picked men and started cruising once more for me.

Sometimes I wondered why folks would let him spend so much time and money on the catching of just one man; but the explaining of it is that he made such a reputation by those hunts and rides after me that other crooks shied clear of his county, saying that unless they had a horse like Cherry Pie it was no use trying to match themselves against that wild devil of a sheriff. And perhaps they was right.

CHAPTER XIX.

JULIE RIDES ON.

WELL, everything looked lucky for me, with Grace out of the way for a minute, as I thought, and the guns of the sheriff spiked once more. So when I seen Cherry tossing her head in the dew of the morning and laughing at me out of her eyes, I decided that it was time to drift on back towards the valley and the girl.

We went down on the run, taking things easy, but covering miles; Cherry didn't know what slow paces meant. Her walk put the ground behind her as brisk as the jog trot of most mustangs; and her trot slid her along as smooth as silk, so that you sat like in a boat going fast down a stream. Her canter wasn't like the lope of a cow pony, because a cow pony lopes by nature and lazies along, not getting anywhere in particular; but the canter of Cherry was an easy stretch that didn't seem to tire her none, and that would float us along as brisk as you please. As for her gallop, why, I've given you some idea of what that was like, except that words don't do it justice. But when you called on her for a gallop, it was like hitching yourself to a kite and turning a wind loose.

So, as I was saying, we blew down to see Julie. And when we got near I seen in front of the house that span of sorrels that Danny Murphy drove; and it made me feel a bit edgy, as you may imagine.

I put Cherry in the woods, and there I waited snug enough and listened to a fool squirrel chattering his head off on a branch above my head until Danny Murphy came out of the house and the girl along with him. They went out and fetched a neat little black gelding which they hitched on behind the rig; and then up the road they went as gay as you please, towards the west, with the sky turning red in front of them

and everything in the valley quiet, except the birds that was settling down in their nests.

I waited until there was a bit more dusk; and then I pelted Cherry Pie along after them, taking a detour across country that kept me out of sight of the road. Because I expected that Julie was just going for a spin with Murphy, and that she would be coming back before long with the black horse.

Following that idea, in the dusk I pulled over and jumped Cherry into the road across a mean-looking barbed-wire fence, and then waited in the shadow of some trees. A whole hour I waited there, while the earth turned black and the sky was peppered with stars. But I had taken on a lot of friendly feeling for the stars since the night that I asked help of them for Cherry and she was pulled through. They seemed sort of companionable and lucky to me, as I waited there by the trees. And, after a time, that hour ended, and I heard the pelting of a horse coming at a full gallop down the road.

Well, how would you expect Julie to come?

She come fast—with both spurs dug into the ribs of that poor nag, and swinging her hat in her hand to make him go quicker, and her hair with all the pins out of it blowed straight back behind her, and her face up to the stars. And while that black mustang stretched out straight as a string with his full speed, she was singing at the top of her voice. It was a good, strong voice, too, and she knew how to use it, so that it came to me as clear as you please and as happy as a hawk dropping out of the sky at a hen in the yard—me being the hen, maybe!

Well, I felt like that, as I listened to her coming, and then saw the shadow streaking down the road. I mean, I felt rather weak and helpless and kept rubbing the neck of Cherry, hoping to get courage out of her. She begun to fidget, because whenever she saw a horse running she thought that it was a call for her to do the same thing.

I let the streak go by me. And I had a pale glimpse of the face of Julie against the stars, laughing into the wind with her song.

Then I loosed up the reins and said one word to Cherry Pie. She nearly jumped out from under the saddle. In six jumps she was skimming at the side of that black mustang; and I had to take a strong pull, until her chin was almost touching her chest, before I could bring her back to the speed of the other nag.

I looked to Julie for a sign. Why, man, I tell you that she just rode right on down the way, with her head still back and her eyes closed and the song bubbling and ringing out of her throat and hanging in the air behind us.

Did she know I was there, while she was riding on so blind? There wasn't any doubt in me. She knew that I was there, and she was showing me that my coming didn't make any such great difference.

Well, I said a word to Cherry; and she began to slow up, but shaking her head, like she hated to do it and wanted to go on and show that girl and that horse what the shape of a clean pair of heels looked like. The minute that Cherry began to drop back, Julie come to life and pulled up the black. And when we stopped, we stopped side by side.

What would she say by way of a greeting, I ask you? I mean, to me, the outlaw and all such and the gent that she had tried to hold up, not so very many months before?

She said, "Cherry Pie doesn't seem to be able to stand the pace, Larry!" Yes, that was what she said. As though her and me had spent the day together. No more surprised than that! She should of been a gambler, she was that cool and easy.

"Maybe Cherry is tired out," said I.

"Tired of what?" says she.

"Why, tired of laughing at things in general."

"At men who try to catch her, say?" suggested Julie.

"Perhaps."

"And sheriffs?" says she.

"Why," I had to confess, "sometimes sheriffs ain't laughing matters."

"Hum!" says Julie. And she waited a minute.

Then I wondered what she had heard about the chase which her father had given me.

"Where are you bound?" says Julie.

"Somewhere on the edge of the sky," I told her. "I ain't just picked out the place. I just happened along."

I wouldn't of said that, of course, if I had known the way that old Choctaw had given me away to her. I wouldn't of said that, knowing how foolish it would seem and sound.

"I thought," says Julie, "that maybe you had come down for the wedding."

"Wedding?" I asked her.

"Danny is marrying me to-morrow," said Julie. "Are you riding along this way?" And she started her mustang down the road.

I didn't hear the last part of what she said. I was in a trance, pretty nearly, from the first part of it. And so I let her go away and sat like a dummy in the saddle.

Why, of course, she was doing what she had promised to Choctaw that she would do. But how was I to know that? No, it looked to me like a clean swipe and no place for Larry Dickon. It was a considerable time before I collected the pieces of myself; and it was a queer thing that the world that had seemed so busting full of fine things only a minute before was a total loss now.

I'm mighty ashamed to say that my first idea was to up and find Murphy and sink a slug of lead through his heart. But I cooled down, and I begun to think steady and clear after that. I knew nothing but good things about Danny. He was the sort of a boy that ought to make her a good husband. And, of course, that was what I should hope for her, if I wasn't a complete pig.

However, trying to reconcile myself to that was no easy job. It was the best part of an hour before I saw the way that I had to back myself out of this job and leave this part of the country and never think of it again and never see it again. Yes, and how I wished that I never had seen it!

I couldn't pull out in cold blood. I had to do something. So what I did was to blow for Danny Murphy's house.

If he was to marry this girl to-morrow, he wouldn't be staying very quiet this evening. And when I came up to his place—it was a small shack of a house—I could hear Danny whistling as gay as a lark; and every note of that whistling made me want to do a murder.

However, I had to go through with what I had staked out for myself. I left Cherry Pie in the field behind the house, and I sneaked along up the far side of the hedge, and so I come into view of the shack itself. I had passed it before and give it a glimpse. But now it seemed to me a miserable small sort of a place for a girl like Julie to be housed. I could sit back and see her drudging around that house and getting raw-handed from dishwater and down-shouldered from leaning over the laundry tub; and I could almost hear the squawling of the baby in the front yard because the chickens had come and pecked at its pink fingers.

Well, I was sort of sickened and saddened.

Still, I had to admit that it was fine of her to pick out a gent like Danny for a husband. He had a growing farm. He was making good money. And when he decided to spend he could build them a bigger and better house, maybe.

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But still I couldn't help hating a gent that would spend his money on a fancy span of nags and a rig to take his girl driving, while he keeps a mean shack for her to make a home out of when he has once persuaded her into marrying him.

It was a low moment for me. I was sick. I was very sick. But I marched on for the house and the whistle of Danny.

CHAPTER XX.

"DANNY MURPHY MURDERED!"

I WOULD ask to be please excused for dodging about, now, and putting things in order exactly as they happened, instead of the order in which I first knowed about them. I mean to say that it would maybe be better for me to go right ahead and tell what happened at the shack of Danny Murphy; but, as a matter of fact, it seems clearer to explain other things first, according to what I learned of them a long while later.

I was saying that Julie went on back to the house of the sheriff on her black mustang. But, when she got close to it, she seen some shadows trooping down the road towards her; and the black give a whinny and kicked up his heels, so that she guessed those were horses that her pony knew. She rode down to see, and she found Wally Ops coming straight along through the night.

There was a good deal of kindness, it seems, between Wally and his girl. Perhaps him being so sawed off and ugly and her being so slim and so pretty had brought them together. Folks that are different can understand each other a lot better than those that are the same kind.

When she gave Wally a hug she says: "Dear old Dad! I hope the next time will be better luck!"

And Wally Ops says, "There ain't gunna be no next time!"

No next time riding out and hunting for crooks like Grace and me, was what he meant by that. And, of course, she understood; but she didn't say a word, and she turned around and begun talking to Choctaw, who happened to of met up with the sheriff and was riding in with him. They was great friends, Choctaw having taught Wally how to ride and shoot when Wally Ops was a boy.

A funny sort of a boy he must of looked!

Well, the three of them got to the house, and "Mom" Ops come running out and grabbed Wally and sort of swallered him in her fat arms and dragged him into the house and sat him down and wiped the grit off of his face and kissed him on the end of the nose and called him her old duck, or something ridiculouser, which I aim to forget—though Choctaw, he reported everything to me, word for word.

Anyway, there was a fuss about the sheriff; but he was so tired that nobody dared to ask too many questions until that Lew come in, and when he seen his dad he let out a yip.

"Is it true that you chased Cherry Pie and Dickon for a hundred and fifty miles, dad?" he sings out.

The sheriff closes his eyes and puts back his head a little; and he says with a groan: "Chased? Goodness knows how many miles it was. I can tell you in horses but not in miles, Lew. Do you all know that Sammy horse of mine?"

They all did.

"When we started I was riding Sammy. I rode him into the ground by noon. There was only a wreck of him left, and it's going to be a month before I can get him home. He's only a hollow horse now. Then I had Dingwall's gray, which, of course, you all of heard about."

He stopped talking. They waited till he was ready to talk again. All that they had heard about the chase had

been just dribbles of news that had come in over the wire and that had been changed around a good deal, being passed from mouth to mouth.

"I rode the gray till he could just manage to raise a stagger," said the sheriff. "And I had the pleasure of seeing Cherry Pie wobbling ahead of me, looking as though she would go down every next stride."

That brought a gasp out of them. The sheriff closed his eyes and opened them again, and when he opened them he said:

"Dickon got into a nest of rocks. I lost sight of him. There was a roaring in my ears. It seemed to me that I could still hear a horse galloping just ahead of me. Maybe it was only the echoing of the hoofs of the gray; but I turned a corner and rode straight onto Dickon, with a gun in his hand."

He made another stop, closing his eyes. And you can believe that nobody hurried him none; they was too scared.

"And then," says the sheriff, "I was fool enough to try a gun play, while Larry Dickon had the drop on me." He laughed, sort of sick. "Dickon had the choice—me or my horse. So he killed the horse, instead of me, and picked me up out of the dirt like a good-for-nothing rat."

He was feeling low, the sheriff was, as you can see for yourself. However, he gathered more strength, after a minute; and Choctaw says that his eyes begun to shine a little.

"We seen that Cherry was nearly dying," said the sheriff, "and we had a hard job over her, hour after hour, rubbing her down. Why, Choctaw, you would of laughed to see that Dickon walking up and down, with the tears streaking along his face, calling to Cherry, and her just able to manage to wobble along after him."

The sheriff, he did the laughing. The others didn't, says Choctaw.

All at once, the girl busts out: "Dear old dad, I'm mighty glad that you'll never have to bother about him any more—about Larry Dickon, I mean!"

"Never bother about him?" says the sheriff. "What d'you mean?"

"Nothing," says the girl.

"Nothing? Julie, what's in your head?"

"I mean, he's going away, I think," says Julie; "and I don't believe that he'll ever come back."

"You believe that he's going away?" says her father, standing up. "What the devil do you know about him?"

She was cornered, and she had to say what had happened. So she came out with it, a little halting—how Choctaw had told her about me, that I was hard hit, and that I was sure coming back that way, and that I had come back.

The sheriff could hardly hold himself. "What's this, Choctaw?" says he. "What's the meaning of this? Does a low-down hound, a man-killing, gun-fighting road agent, dare to look at my Julie? My Julie?"

Well, Choctaw was a little flabbergasted; but he got help where he least expected it. Because Julie up and says, "Is that any way to talk about a man who could have taken your own life, father, and who let you go free?"

"Hang my life!" says the sheriff. "Go on and tell me! What happened? You seen this sneaking Dickon?"

"I did," says the girl, "and I'm afraid that Choctaw was right, from the way that he acted. But I did what Choctaw told me to do. I sent him away."

"You sent him away?" shouted the sheriff, getting hotter and hotter. "You told him to run away, little boy. And he run, I suppose? Am I crazy, Julie?"

"No," said Julie; "I told him that I was to be married to-morrow."

"The girl's out of her wits," said the sheriff. "What a fool thing to say! And what's the meaning of it?"

"He sat in the saddle without speaking, as though I had shot him," said

Julie. "And I'll swear that he's leaving this part of the country—because Choctaw was right. Choctaw, say something!"

"Me?" says Choctaw. "I say that you're right. When Larry hears that, he'll cut loose and drift for some other place."

"But what if he hears that it ain't the truth?" barked the sheriff.

"He'll never have a chance to hear that," said Julie. "Is he likely to go ask the man that I said I was to marry?"

"Wait a minute," cut in Choctaw. "You didn't give him any name of a man, did you?"

"What's wrong with that?" asked Julie.

"Wrong?" growled the sheriff. "Everything's wrong. Who did you name?"

"Why, he saw me drive up the road this evening with Danny Murphy."

"Great guns!" groaned the sheriff. "Was that Dickon near my house this same evening? Danny Murphy—was it Danny you said that you was to marry?"

"Yes."

The sheriff hollered: "Lew, saddle the blue roan for me. Choctaw, will you lend a hand? No, I'll ride by myself and find him, even if he is a devil."

Lew had scooted for the door. The sheriff started after him; but he had a heavy anchor to drag along with him, because Mom Ops had fetched a hold on him, and she was saying:

"Wally, what does it all mean? What has happened? What has Julie done?"

"What has Julie done?" yelled the sheriff. "Nothing except to get Danny Murphy murdered! That's all that she's done! My gosh, it's the worst thing that ever happened in my life! My own daughter—Dickon—poor Danny! Lemme go!" And he fought himself clear of Mom and dived through the doorway.

Julie would of followed, but Choctaw caught her by the shoulders and held her back.

"There ain't anything to do," says he. "I'm too old, and you're a girl; and when trouble begins to bust loose, what can you and me do?"

"Uncle Choctaw," says Julie, crying with excitement, "what does dad mean? Is he wild enough to think that Larry Dickon would try to——"

"Hush up!" said Choctaw. "It ain't any use crying. Set still and keep your head high."

"But tell me the truth, because you know Larry Dickon as nobody else knows him."

"Why," says Choctaw, "you had better get yourself braced right now and ready for the truth, because otherwise it would be a terrible shock to you. But I tell you, Julie, that poor Danny Murphy is dead as sure as if you had took him and throwed him off the top of Cumberland Rock."

And he pointed out the window, as though she could see through the black of the night to Cumberland Rock, big and dark and scarred and mean looking and so high that it scared you just to look up at its face.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MISTAKE.

PERHAPS, because you have been following me around so steady, it may seem queer to you that so many folks that knew me might of thought that I would murder the gent that was to marry the girl that I loved. But that, maybe, is because I have showed myself a little better than the fact—seeing as how you can't talk about yourself very well without putting your best foot forward. Or, even if you put down all the facts, you arrange them in such a way that everything looks right and natural that you did. If that wasn't the case, then there wouldn't be any very great need for twelve men on a jury

and law and judges and what not. Because nobody is going to make himself out very wicked.

Well, the fact is that while these things went on at the house of the sheriff I sneaked up behind the little shack of Danny Murphy; and, when I looked in through the back window, I could see that it wasn't so bad at all. As a matter of fact, it was laid out good, so far as the furniture went. The kitchen had everything that a body was to want, and the kitchen would be almost the first thing that would appeal to the heart of a girl that was to marry a small farmer. Still, somehow, I wondered at that girl picking out this sort of a life, instead of tying up with a rich rancher, such as I knew that she could of picked and chose among.

However, marrying ain't the sort of a thing that a good girl will use much logic on. I had to remember that. Because if there was any logic in it, how had I ever dared to let myself fall in love with her? It would of been a hopeless job for me. Thinking of these things, I followed around to the front of the house, where the whistling was going on, and there I saw young Danny walking back and forth with his hands in his pockets and the whiff of a good cigar coming back to me.

At the next turn I stepped out and laid a gun in the small of the back of Danny.

"Take this easy, Murphy," I said.

He had a good memory for voices, that boy did. He stopped right still, and he said under his breath, "It's Dickon, by Heaven!"

"It's Dickon, right enough," I admitted. "The first thing for you to know is that I ain't come here to do you any harm."

He was steady enough, I got to say, though I wasn't very anxious to find out good things about him. He said: "What is it that you want, Dickon? A layout of chuck for yourself and some oats for Cherry Pie? Is that it? Or are you hard up for cash?"

It was so mighty reasonable to hear him talk like this that I softened a good deal towards him.

"I ain't come for your chuck or for your money, Danny," I told him. "All that I've come to do is to talk to you a little mite about your marriage."

"About my which?" says he.

"Your marriage," says I, "Does it seem queer that I should know about it?"

He laughed a little. "Why," says he, "as a matter of fact, it does seem a little queer."

"She told me her own self," I said to him. "So the first thing that I want to do is to congratulate you, Danny, on getting a girl like Julie Ops for a wife."

"Julie!" he gasps. "By gad!"

"Well?" said I.

"Nothing," says he. "But would you mind telling me when she told you this?"

"Right now, as I met her on the road," I said.

"It's queer, but—well, let it go! What's in your mind, Dickon?"

"I wanted to know, Danny, if you got the things that you need for starting in on a married life. Will you tell me that?"

"Like what?" he asked me.

"Like enough horses to work your fields, and rakes and mowing machines and such?"

"I suppose not," says he, chuckling a little, "but then, a girl wouldn't be marrying a set of farm tools, would she?"

"I ain't joking," I warned him.

"Ask your pardon, then," says young Murphy.

"I've come to offer to help," I told him.

"Help? The devil you have!"

"I mean it."

"How would you help?"

"I have some money here," says I. "I want you to take it, Danny, and use

it to fix things up so you can give that girl an easier life. You understand me?"

He understood me right enough, and he fired back at me, "Look here, old-timer, are you aiming to make me a cash loan?"

"Loan be darned!" said I. "I would be an honest rancher right this minute, if it wasn't for a loan that a friend made to me once. That loan kicked me out of my house, took my horse from under my saddle, swiped the tools on the place, ate up my land little by little, and carted the hay and the straw right out of my fields. A loan is a sort of a dragon for a farmer, especially for a young one. No, Danny, I don't mean that."

"What the devil do you mean, then?"

"I mean, it's a free gift."

"What? Wait a minute, Dickon, because——"

"I'm free to say that this ain't money that was took from any honest man, so you don't need to think that you're using stuff that you shouldn't. If it stayed with me, it would pretty soon be spent on Old Lady Roulette or Miss Fantan or some such girl as that. Y'understand? It ain't enough to make such a lot of talk. But what there is of it is yours. It ain't much. But if you pick out the spot where you need money the most—like a couple of spans of horses and harness, say, or some mowing machines, or maybe a new barn or something like that, and invest it all on that one spot—then you'll have something to show for it. It's a thousand, Danny. And here you are."

I slipped it into his pocket and backed away.

"Hey, Dickon!" he called and whirled around at me.

I whistled the call for my Cherry, and I heard her hoofs swinging towards me quick as a flash out of the field behind the house.

"Don't argue, Danny," I told him. "The fact is that I'm interested in how you and her get along. If you land up in a pinch, after a while, why, maybe I can get hold of something that will pull you out of the hole. It'll give me something to live for, outside of myself and my horse. And——"

"Dickon," says he, "tell me straight. You wanted that girl for yourself?"

"Let that slide," says I; "but what ——"

"Man, man," says he, "take back this money and take it quick. Larry, this is wonderful white of you! It's the sort of a thing that wouldn't be believed; only, you see——"

"Never mind the talk," said I, "because this job is done; and now that I've seen you and had a few words with you, I can say that, as long as she had to marry some other gent, I'm glad that you're the one that it had to be."

Cherry come swooping for me like a hawk out of the sky.

And Danny came at me, calling: "It's a mistake, old-timer! It's all a mistake, Larry. Bless you for it, man; but it's just a joke that——"

I didn't wait to hear the rest. I could see that he needed the money. And any young gent with pride wouldn't of wanted to take money like that from a stranger. But, now that I had given him the coin, I wanted to back out as fast as I could. So I hooked onto Cherry as she come up to me; and I went into the saddle and away with her, without her ever breaking out of her gallop—which was a trick that her and me had practiced by the hour. Real circus stuff that looks pretty good when it works and pretty foolish when it only lands you on your head in the dust.

Anyway, there I was, all in the saddle and waving back to Danny Murphy as he ran after me, screeching something that the wind of my gallop made dim in my ears; but he was still holding out that money in the starlight and talking about a mistake, as near as I could tell.

However, I was glad to have Cherry over the fence and into the roadway. I was glad to have my duty done behind me; and I swore to myself that I would never want to see the face of him or of his wife so long as I lived; but that only lasted for a minute. And then I began to figure that this wasn't so bad. There wasn't so much bitterness in me as I thought that there would be, because, having started out like that, now I was sort of interested. And I thought that maybe there would be sort of fun in giving a hand to Danny, now and then, and putting him straight when he got in crooked.

A miserable sort of a happiness that was, though. And just then I had something else to think about, because I heard a roar of galloping horses ahead of me.

I guessed that it might be intended for me, and so I hopped Cherry into the woods and waited. And pretty soon four riders come whishing by; and, against the stars, I could of swore that that was little Wally Ops riding slanting, with the brim of his sombrero furled up away from his ugly face.

So I knew that he was after me again, and I went all sick, because I was sure that the girl had give me away.

To be continued in the next issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

MONTANA'S VANISHING AMERICANS

THE recent celebration of the Custer semicentennial at the scene of the famous Battle of the Little Big Horn has given rise to some speculation as to the present Indian population of the West. In this connection, it was remarked that Montana to-day has more Indians than at the time Custer met his death, and that the expression "vanishing American" as applied to the Indians is a misnomer.

Government statistics show that there are more Indians in the United States to-day than at any time since 1860, at which time a census of the red men showed a total of 254,300. In 1924, the number had risen to 346,962.

According to figures gathered from old records, the Indian population of Montana in 1876 was about 10,434, and this figure has not varied much down to the present time. It was put at 10,745 in 1910, and at 10,960 in 1920. It is believed, however, that the earlier figure, that of 1876, represented a number of Indians who were in the State only temporarily. At that time, there were 7,500 of the Blackfoot, Blood, and Piegan tribes; the Assiniboines numbered 997; the Flatheads and others, 502; the Gros Ventres, 535; and the River Crows, 900.

The Indians who fought against Custer were not Montana Indians, but were of the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne tribes, from Wyoming, Dakota, and Colorado. The total number of redskins engaged in the Battle of the Little Big Horn is put at 2,500 by military authorities.

No Gent to Fool With

By Ernest Haycox

Author of "Rimrock and Rattlesnakes," etc.

THE stranger with the immense shoulders and the barrel chest had been in the Forty-niner's card-room for half an hour, brooding at a corner table. He seemed wholly immersed in his own scowling reflections and took no interest at all in the half dozen men scattered around the place. And, during this period, he had uttered but five words; one to the clerk, calling for a cigar and the others to a drunken cow-puncher who had stumbled into the place and had started to settle down by him. "Get outen here!" he rumbled. The cow-puncher departed forthwith and left the taciturn chap to his thoughts.

But when young Lee Brent shoved back the swinging doors and strode leisurely to the counter, marshal's badge plainly visible on his vest, the burly one sat up; and a surprised look shot across his face. He stared at Brent's long and skinny frame for some moments—until an angry and almost resentful light burned in his eyes, and a low-muttered query rose in his throat.

"Where'd that toothpick get a star? Where's Jake Hawkins? Thought he was still marshal o' this gopher hole. They must be raidin' the cradles hereabouts for suitable material!"

But for all his belligerence he kept his voice discreetly low while his black, challenging eyes swept Brent from Stetson to boots, never missing a detail. For that matter, the young marshal was not a hard man to read. He eased his rawboned frame against the counter and grinned amiably at the clerk. He could not have been more than twenty-five; his clean-shaven face, frank, sharp features, and sorrel thatch made him seem even younger. He appeared the last man in the world to have assumed the sometimes onerous duty of keeping the peace. Indeed, as he poured himself a glass of root beer and looked mildly around the room he had the air of one

who wished trouble from nobody and asked nothing but to be let alone. His eyes fell momentarily, without a trace of curiosity, upon the frowning stranger and then dropped to his glass.

The stranger breathed hard and seemed doubly displeased. "If I'd 'a' known this yearlin' was on the job I shore wouldn't 'a' fooled around so long."

The drunken cow-puncher veered unsteadily across the room and reached the counter after several frantic gestures. His rolling eyes caught sight of Lee Brent's star and instantly the man squared himself in an attitude of antagonism. "I smell sheep!" he shouted. "Sheep! Hate the smell of sheep! Oughta be uh law agin' sheep in this here emporium!" He stopped and grinned slyly. "Oh—it's—it's nothin' but uh town marshal. Thought it was sheep. Same thing as sheep, anyhow. Yeah!"

Brent chuckled. "Tilly, your smeller is workin' overtime to-night, an' so is your appetite for hard beverages. Where'd you find the shellac?"

The cow-puncher drew himself up. "No goggle-faced, son-of-a-fiddle-backed nester c'n tell me that!"

Brent was still smiling. "Your allegations are sure sensational, Tilly. Yes, they are. Ain't you slightly distortin' the truth?"

"I'll distort yuh, Mister Brent! Any more passes like that 'n' I'll shoot the wart offen your nose!"

"Easy, Tilly. Ca'tridges are too plumb expensive to waste. Better sleep it off."

The swaying cow-puncher was on the point of pouring another and more pointed verbal torrent on Lee Brent's head when two of his friends took him by the arms and led him away. Brent dropped a quarter on the counter and addressed the clerk. "It would sure seem like the gent didn't like my presence. Which point is soon remedied." And, still smiling genially, he strolled out of the place. The frowning stranger sighed in pure disgust. "He ain't got the gizzards of a doodlebug. Backin' down afore a drunk ranch han'. I'd 'a' plastered that gent all over this here floor. Can't keep nobody's respeck by crawlin' out a door like that. An' me waitin' three weeks—I'm shore aggravated at myself."

He finished his cigar and rose. Passing the counter he threw down some money and followed Brent from the place. The marshal, he saw, was strolling down the one dim-lit street of the town. The stranger took the opposite direction and crossed over. Somewhere in the deep shadows beyond the livery stable he turned again and found that the marshal had vanished from sight. So, looking carefully around, he cut across a vacant lot cluttered with broken boxes and decrepit wagons and came finally to an old shanty standing somewhat away from the rest of the buildings. There were no lights in the place but this gave the man no concern. He reached the door and knocked twice, softly. A voice growled, "Come in." The door squeaked beneath the stranger's fist and groaned shut behind him.

"That you, Qu'Arell?" asked the voice.

"Yeah," said the stranger, stumbling over a chair. "Why don't you light up?"

"It'd draw flies," came the dry rejoinder. "Where's your sense o' caution?"

"After seein' that white-livered yearlin' that passes as marshal o' these diggin's I don't see no reason for caution," replied Qu'Arell, sinking into a chair. "Where's Jake Hawkins? He was marshal last time I was here."

"Jake's been sick. Went north for an operation. Young Brent took his place fer the time bein'."

Qu'Arell swore softly and reached for his chewin' tobacco. "Wisht I'd

known that. Old Jake's a fire eater and a reg'lar catamount when it comes to fightin'. That's why I sent you an' Meeders down here to spy out. Wanted to get the lay o' the land so's we wouldn't run into him. But the kid don't drag no weight. We c'd pulled the job two weeks ago without no scoutin' so long's he was marshal."

The voice dissented. "Wouldn't be too shore about that. Brent was a deputy afore he came here. He's got one notch on his gun that I know of."

"Kid luck," snorted Qu'Arell. "I'll scotch him in a minute. It was old Jake I was afeerd of. Him bein' outa the way we'll do things up slick."

The door groaned again and the voice challenged: "That you, Meeders?"

"Uh-uh," said the newcomer. "Brent's just gone in the marshal's office. Does it every night about this time after makin' his rounds. Won't likely be out again fer a couple hours."

Another chair creaked. Qu'Arell grunted his approval. "Things are workin' fine. Now what about the bank?"

The newcomer, Meeders, spoke. "Well, Rixey an' I come here two weeks back like you told us an' set up as nesters lookin' fer land. Meanwhile we been keepin' an eye on things. I sorta watched Brent. Rixey kep' an eye to the bank. You tell him, Rixey."

The dry voice took up the tale. "There's an old gent who's the whole works. One of these old-timers who knows everybody in th' county. Works late at night, clean up to ten o'clock, addin' figures an' sech. Keeps the door locked, but lots of times a cowhand will come in after dark with a check to cash an' rattle on the door. The old-timer most generally opens it an' lets the gent in. I figgered it would be good policy to start a leetle account —twenty dollars—in the bank so's we could do that same trick. There's a burglar alarm hitched from the safe over to the marshal's office, but I snuck in las' night when this Brent fella was out on his rounds an' stuffed the bell full o' paper. It won't ring now."

Qu'Arell chuckled. "Well, I been busy, too. Learned in Prairie City there'd been a good-sized shipment to this bank—pay money fer the ranchers. It'll be there, all right. Well, we're set. Let's go."

Rixey's voice was strained. "Don't you be fooled by this Brent. He ain't dumb."

"Scared?" drawled Qu'Arell.

"None whatsoever. But I was just a-tellin' you. Somethin' tells me he'll shore dog our steps once we get away."

"Which'll be plumb bad fer him," said Qu'Arell. "Let's move. We'll leave the hosses behind the bank, do it quick, an' make a run fer the prairie."

"Wait a half hour until the gents in the cardroom ride home," said Meeders. "There's a back door to the bank which I managed to get a duplicate key for. I'll go in that way. You an' Rixey take the front."

Qu'Arell rose. "I'll bring my hoss around. Meet you here again. No gun play now, onless its plumb necessary. Quiet an' quick—that's the best."

"Leave me do the coaxin'," said Rixey. "I know most about the safe."

Qu'Arell crept out of the door and retraced his way across the vacant lot. The shadows around the stable were impenetrable, and the big man nodded in satisfaction. "If I'd known Jake was away we c'd 'a' done this two weeks ago. As fer that kid——" He vanished around the stable, bound for the hitching rack near the cardroom.

Meeders, as had been his custom for two weeks, had watched Brent disappear in the marshal's office, himself being hidden in the shadows near the livery stable. After a patient quarter-hour vigil he had left his covert and retreated to the dark shanty, there to report to his two confederates that the young

marshal was safely bedded down for an hour or two. But what he could not know and did not see was Lee Brent's subsequent actions. There was a rear door to the marshal's office which Brent quickly dodged through. Cutting around the rear of the restaurant, the cardroom, and sundry other buildings, he crossed the street at a remote place and worked his way toward the dark shanty. So, when Qu'Arell came out and stumbled over the vacant lot, breathing hard and muttering to himself, Brent was safely hidden behind an old wagon bed. He could have reached out and touched the big man's leg as the latter passed.

"Uh-uh," said Brent, checking up things in his own mind. "That was the big stranger with the hard face. Makes three of them now. Looks to me as if something was due to bust. Hope so. Gettin' tired of snoopin' here ten nights in a row."

His suspicions had been roused the very first day that they rode into town, these two typical prairie gentry. They had taken the town into their confidence —that is, they had told the clerk of the cardroom and it had spread by the gravity system—as to their intention of finding homestead land. And every day they had religiously ridden out upon the plain in quest of what they wanted, appearing in town rather regularly at supper time. Brent, who had grown up among homesteaders, had at first found it hard to reconcile their visages with the homesteading impulse. They were the kind, he knew, who had worked a few weeks or a month at nearly every ranch in the country, moving on whenever a stake was made. Homesteading seemed hardly in their line. Yet he gave them the benefit of the doubt and thought nothing more about it until on the third or fourth evening he saw Meeders slip into a shadow not far from the bank and stay there for some length of time. After that Brent had done scout duty of his own. Perhaps he never would have noticed this bit of nocturnal work had be not been prowling in the darkness himself. Being new at the job he had taken his duties seriously.

"Them two have been thicker'n thieves," he mused. "And now the big hombre comes dustin' into town and has a session in the shanty. Looks plumb fishy to me. Yeah! If they're lookin' for trouble it must be the bank, because outside o' that institution there ain't a dime's worth of valuable property from the waterin' trough to the cow pens."

He had warned old Apperson about admitting stray punchers into the bank after dark, too. For which pains, he reminded himself, he had been given a snappy answer. "Young feller, I built up my business by bein' obligin' to folks, an' there ain't been a holdup yet. Don't be so cussed officious. Be glad when Jake gets back."

He sighed and eased his position. "Be glad myself," he muttered. The next moment he had flattened himself behind the wagon bed. A horse advanced across the vacant lot. The shanty door squeaked, and Brent saw faint shadows bulking against the darkness. They disappeared toward the open prairie, skirting the town.

He got up and went around the stable, traveling down the dark street toward the far end where the bank stood. The restaurant lights were out, and through the windows of the cardroom he saw the clerk sweeping. His own office had a single lamp burning on the table. When he approached the bank he saw, through the window of the locked door, old Apperson's head bobbing up and down as he crossed the floor. Presently he heard the drunken cow-puncher coughing fitfully somewhere. "Darn fool will wake up nine miles out, sleepin' nex' to a cactus," he opined, settling himself in the shadows. "Some folks have a queer notion o' pleasure."

He had no idea of how long he waited in the shadows. Twice he changed position, gingerly shaking the cramp from his legs. Old Apperson made numerous trips across his room, packing ledgers and bundles of papers. A misguided alarm clock rang violently somewhere in the hotel not far off. A dog howled. And, immediately after, Brent saw two figures walk swiftly from the darkness that covered the rear of the bank and advance upon the door. The light from the bank struck first the barrel-chested stranger and next the one known as Rixey.

The latter tapped on the glass of the door, and as he did so Brent saw him wave a small slip of paper—it appeared something like a check—in the light. Presently he saw Apperson come into sight and fumble with the locks. The door opened with a squeak, and the two men walked in.

He had the impulse then to rise and cross over but checked himself. "No use bustin' up their play now. If I horn in too soon they'll claim to be on regular business, and I'll look foolish. Wait."

Wait he did for another short minute. He noted that Apperson's wizened, unfriendly face had no suspicion on it. The nasal, cheerless voice carried across to Brent's covert. "Well, what you want this time o' night? I ain't payin' out on checks to-night. Locked the money in the safe. Come to-morrow. Close that tarnal door, will you! Flies eat a man up!"

Qu'Arell stood back a pace, screening Rixey as the latter spoke. The man's tone was so low that Brent could make out nothing save a short, urgent summons. Old Apperson's reply was more of an outraged cry—a cry broken off in the middle by Qu'Arell's hands. The latter took Apperson bodily and carried him beyond the door, out of view. Brent, rising, heard the burly stranger cursing, threatening.

The young marshal tarried only a moment longer, staring into the shadows which cloaked the rear of the bank. Somewhere in those shadows the third man waited with an eye peeled toward the small lanes of light that emerged from the front door. Brent swerved suddenly and ran out in the street at an angle to avoid being caught by those revealing rays. The move brought him against the front side of the bank and, creeping along the wall, he reached the door and jumped inside, revolver in hand.

"Reach for air," he called, in a short, sing-song voice. "Reach for air—fast!"

Qu'Arell's back was turned. He had Apperson by the throat and was slowly crowding the old man to the floor, strangling him. But Rixey saw Brent instantly and, raising a cry of warning, reached for his gun. Brent pressed his lips together and waited until the man's weapon came up. He saw Rixey's narrow face assume a strange frozen shape. The room rattled and roared, and the smoke curled back upon Brent, choking him. A blast of air struck him on the cheek and a shot crashed against the front wall. Rixey shouted with all his strength, "Qu'Arell, I warned you about him!" and sank down.

Someone cried a question across the narrow street, but Brent had no ear for it; Qu'Arell, half turned, was trying to reach his gun, and old Apperson, kneeling on the floor, was blocking the move with his skinny arms. "Raise 'em up!" warned Brent. "Raise 'em—Mister Qu'Arell!"

The big man kicked Apperson aside with a cry of rage and brought up his gun. The rear door burst open, and the third member of the gang—Meeders—poked an excited face in. "Qu'Arell, better break! Town's comin' out! Come on!" Brent weaved aside. Old man Apperson was shrilly crying, "Watch his gun, Lee! His gun!" Brent saw Meeders spring backward,

firing as he retreated. The lamp crashed in a hundred pieces, flamed, and left the room in total darkness. Qu'Arell was flooding the place with profanity, and Brent, leaping forward, was met by another shot and a challenge:

"All right, kid! You win—this time; but I'll see you ag'in!"

He heard the heavy body retreating and fired point-blank. But he heard the big man shout again and knew that he had missed his target. Apperson was coughing with a long dragging of his breath, trying to talk. "Lee, that big one got me! Got me, I say! Go ketch him!"

A fusillade of shots echoed down the side alley. Qu'Arell's voice, still erupting oaths, came clearly back, challenging the town. Brent groped forward, crossed the dead Rixey's body, and reached the door in time to hear some one else hailing the bank. "Brent—hey, Brent—you there?"

A sudden calm dropped over the alley. Brent stumbled back, fumbling for a match as cautious steps clumped on the boards. "Yeah," said he, striking the match. "One of you boys run across an' get a lantern. Apperson's drilled."

It was done in a moment. The clerk from the cardroom, wiping his hands on his apron, pushed through with the light and raised it above his head. "Apperson—they get you?"

There was no answer, and when Brent reached the man and dropped on a knee, he found that the old banker was dead. "Fifty-fifty," he announced. "I got one of 'em, and they did likewise. The big chap did it. Plain downright murder. Shot Apperson while the old-timer was down. Well, he'll sure burn for that."

Some one in the small crowd sang out, "All right, let's get our hawsses and go round 'em up. Reckon it won't do to let a passel o' mavericks raise sech hell in our town."

Brent interrupted the speaker. "Posse? What good is a posse in the dark? You'll clutter up the trail. I'll just sashay after that party myself. You gents better clean up this battlefield. Put some padlocks on the doors an' set a guard."

The clerk broke in. "Shucks, Lee, it's a big chaw fer one man. Them gents seem like a rough pair. Better take help with you."

"Hunh. One man's plenty. More'n that is unhandy and plumb useless. If I ain't back in two-three days you can send out a regular convention. I won't be carin'. Meanwhile the big gent seemed to be wishful for another tatytate, so I guess I'll oblige him."

He ran from the place and down the street to the stable. In twenty minutes he had saddled his horse, put a little food in his roll, and was cruising out on the prairie. Crossing a ridge he losf sight of the town lights and turned boldly south.

As he traveled he put himself in the place of the outlaws, trying to judge the route they would take across country. Almost before he had jumped into the saddle he had discarded the north and the northeast. Either of those directions would lead the pair into a more thickly settled country with big ranches and a few small towns. Undoubtedly they would know that an alarm would be sent out over the telephone and that safety lay in striking toward more uninhabited regions.

"And the wildest and best hidin' place would be in them mountains," opined Brent, nodding his head toward the west where the Cascades loomed up toward the sky, their peaks silhouetted against the lesser blackness. "But that's real hill country—timber country—and if I'm any judge of human nature, which I don't set out to be, they won't tackle timber. They're open-air waddies. Never knew a real prairie gent to hit the hills if he could avoid it."

One by one he discarded various exits from the broad plain, rejecting each with some reason which seemed to him weighty enough to sway Qu'Arell and Meeders. He was left finally with two trails that led south. "They could pass to the left over the Casper Range, or they could take the old military road across the lava beds. Either is a plumb good way for a couple of eggs like them, and it'd take a mind reader to guess which they'll follow. Anyhow I'll just go along a few more miles."

When he at last slid from the saddle and picketed his horse the night was far advanced, and a sharp chill was in the prairie air. In the distance the coyotes howled. He rolled himself into the blanket and stared reflectively at the dark sky. "Right about here the trails separate. No use in my blunderin' past their hoofprints. If I'm on the right track I'll pick 'em up first thing in the mornin'. If I'm wrong, then I'm wrong a good twenty miles. All a gamble, but I'll sure catch up with that big fella before the year's over or I'm a left-handed Chinaman. Uh-uh." He chuckled softly as he thought of the drunken cow-puncher who at this time probably was sleeping alongside some cactus plant. "Guess we're both in the same boat. And some folks call it pleasure!"

He was up and in the saddle again at the first break of light. Across the level country, at the southeast corner of the horizon, stood the Casper Range; to the south rose a rocky mass that, as the sun came up, glistened and flashed in the fresh light. This was the lava bed. Sweeping the country carefully he was unable to see on the vast stage a single sign of life other than the wheeling birds in the sky or the ever present jack rabbit. But, going about his job methodically, he began a long circle that swept him across the military road—two ruts in the sandy soil—and then upon the trail that led to the distant range. The first reconnoisance proved fruitless, and he reached out upon a longer arc. It was while doing this that he caught sight of two horsemen rising from an arroyo, traveling leisurely toward the southeast. They were too far away to be recognizable but Brent, standing in the stirrups, gave them a long scrutiny and pronounced his judgment.

"Might possibly be prospectors, only such gents would be leadin' burros. If it was casual travelers they'd a-been through Rawhide, and I'd heard of 'em. Nope, it's the waddies I'm wantin' to see. Horse, get along."

They were going into country he didn't know a great deal about, he opined, as he urged the pony to a steady, comfortable pace. So far, neither his official business nor his private affairs had ever caused him to go beyond the foot of the range. There was, he recalled, a river springing somewhere out of the rocks and flowing toward the south, somewhere far beyond the lava beds. This was about the limit of his information. "But we're sure going to learn, horse. Looks as if it'll be a good old game of hide-an'-seek. Can't catch 'em by plain chasin'. Have to do some fancy tricks, I guess."

The morning wore on, and the sun, sliding up from the eastern horizon, became hotter. Brent dipped into an arroyo and rose again. It did not seem that the distance between himself and the outlaws had varied by so much as a rod; yet when he scanned the hoofprints in front of him he emitted a satisfied grunt. "One horse is gettin' tired. That'd be Qu'Arell's. Reckon it traveled a good distance before reachin' Rawhide las' night." His eyes squinted shrewdly ahead of him and scanned the approaching foot of the range. Steadily, he pushed ahead.

It was well past noon with the sun blazing down. The sweat trickled below Qu'Arell's hatband, and when he swung his heavy body in the saddle it

was to view the pursuing Brent with a sudden explosion of oaths. "That kid —how in dangnation did he git so near to us?"

Meeders seemed to take the situation more equably. "Didn't expect you could get away 'thout bein' chased, did you?"

The big man grunted. "Of course not. But I reckoned to lose the posse in the night. It gets me how he managed to keep on our heels durin' the dark!"

"Guess Rixey was plumb right. Brent ain't a fool. He's got the face of a gent who's plumb hard to bluff. Guess mebbe he just used his head and figgered things out."

"Well, I'm dang neart a notion to turn back and shoot it out. No squirt like that c'n chase me around the landscape."

Meeders spoke vigorously. "No you ain't, either. Ten to one he's got a rifle along. He'd pick us off like crows. It's us fer the hills."

Qu'Arell went on for a half mile before speaking again. But the anger would not stay down, and at last he burst out: "Comin' on alone like we was small potatoes! After crossin' me, killin' Rixey, an' cheatin' us out of a nice jack pot! By golly, I'll singe his whiskers. He'll be buzzard bait when I git through!"

"How?" said the more practical Meeders.

Qu'Arell's scowling face took in the rising land ahead of them. They were now traveling up a slight slope, leaving the flat plain behind. Presently they shifted to go single file along a narrow trail that passed between high shoulders of rock. It brought them face to face with rugged, treeless land that mounted steeply. A faint breath of air came to them and Meeder rubbed his forehead, exclaiming gratefully, "There's water ahead. We'll be at the river by sundown. But how you goin' to scotch him, Qu'Arell? That's what I'm honin' to know."

"There's a bend in the river where we strike it, ain't there?"

"Yep. A bend that shoots around a bluff. Why?"

Qu'Arell was grinning. "You jest do like I tell you. We'll hang his hide out to dry when mornin' comes ag'in!"

Brent reached the shoulders of rock much later as the sun was hovering along the western horizon. Like a cautious man he dismounted and reconnoitered on both sides of the obstruction, and after he had ridden through he spent a considerable amount of time surveying the ground in front. It was still rather barren country, but farther up, where the trail made a dip, he saw a sprinkling of boulders. So far as he could see they were innocent of ambushers and he pushed on. He, too, felt the fresher air that augured water in the distance. As he traveled the terrain spread out more clearly before his eyes, and he rode confidently down the small gulley and up its farther side, with the tracks of the outlaws guiding him toward some miniature bald buttes.

The sun sank below the western hills, and of a sudden a bluish haze spread throughout the air. Brent climbed the heavy grade with an increasing watchfulness toward the boulders. The trail zigzagged up the side of a particularly steep hill, all parts of which were exposed to his inspection. It took him an hour or better to negotiate this and when at last he arrived at the summit he was faced by a rather long meadow. There seemed to be two trails branching out; one to the left, down a grade, the other straight forward. The rush of water came up strongly from a near-by cañon, and the evening breeze struck Brent gratefully in the face.

The shadows were becoming so dark that he was forced to get from the horse to locate the hoofprints of the fugitives.

They led straight across the meadow to what appeared to be the beginning of another steep grade. At any rate the meadow seemed to merge abruptly with the foot of a bluff. Brent, peering dubiously, was moved to comment. "Wish I knew this country better. That road to the left must go down to the river. Straight ahead is what the signs say, so that's our road, pony. Get along."

It seemed that a screen had been drawn across the sky. Darkness fell unexpectedly, bringing in its train the stars, shining faintly, and the moon with its crescent slit. The farther Brent traveled across the meadow the more doubtful did he become, and at last he brought the pony to a dead halt, not ten yards from a clutter of small rocks and rubble. The surge of the river welled up more clearly. "Seems to me," he muttered, "that somethin's plumb wrong about this."

His thoughts were cut short. Across the meadow floated the whinny of a horse. It came from the left, and it acted upon Brent like the clanging of a fire gong. He leaped from his pony and pulled the rifle from its boot. Hard upon this came a more summary challenge. A gun barked, spreading an orange ring of flame against the darkness. The whine of the bullet went above Brent's head and he, prone on the hard rubble, took a hasty aim and returned the compliments—with interest.

"Waitin' fer me, huh?" he grunted. "Waitin' for me to get inside good revolver distance. Off down that other trail, out of sight——"

He ducked and heard again the angry progress of a lead pellet just above his head. His horse started, reared violently and fell down, threshing the ground with his hoofs. Brent scrambled to avoid being struck, a cold chill of rage coming to him.

"That was from the right side. Shootin' my pony, huh? Well, I guess two can play at this."

He turned around and began a slow progress in the direction he had originally been pursuing before the attack. He had not gone more than twenty feet, planning to circle around and take one of these ambushers from the rear, when a gust of air came up from below him, and the water sounded in his ears. He put an arm forward and felt it slide over and down the side of a rock wall. He had come upon the cañon's rim!

"Now if I had been walkin' in the dark," he muttered, drawing a deep breath, "I'd have plunked over and down, the Lord knows how many feet. Trapped—mighty neat!"

Another bullet sang across the flat space behind him, but so busy was he with his own thoughts that he gave the gun play no attention. "What the Sam Hill? Here I am on a sort of tongue of land—river curvin' around like a horse-shoe. Me right at the end of it. If I want to get out I got to go back the way I came an' prob'ly those sons of guns have crept over to block it. Yeah. There were some boulders on the trail which would make a good bulwark for 'em. Here I am cornered like a weasel with no place to go. When daylight comes they'll pick me off, or else starve me out. Brent, you're in trouble!"

He was indeed. The longer he thought of the situation the more serious did it seem. "Fellow that planned this wouldn't be afraid to shake hands with a rattlesnake. Must be Qu'Arell. Well, what'm I goin' to do?"

Whatever he did must be done before daylight, that was certain. Darkness was the best aid he had. For a moment he contemplated crawling straight back and taking a chance on passing the outlaws; but when he had about decided to try this another bullet was thrown over the flat ground, and by the small point of flame he saw that they seemed to

have converged directly behind him. So he shook his head, muttering: "Too narrow a space. I might have an equal chance with one, but the other'd pot me."

He put his head over the cañon wall again and listened. He had no way of knowing how far below the surface of the river was; it seemed to swell at times and be only a few feet; again it appeared to be remote and inaccessible. Coming out of the mountain as it did, the current was swift and here and there the splash and hissing of the current indicated rock obstructions. Brent pondered, weighing alternatives in his mind. Again he listened. "That other road seemed to go down to the water. Must be a ford just a little ways around the bend. Fellow'd stand a good chance of striking bottom and wading out—if he could get down there—uh-uh!"

The exclamation was one of satisfaction. Another bullet passed him at uncomfortably close quarters. Turning carefully, he crawled back to his horse, untied his lariat and retraced his way to the cañon's rim. His next search was for something solid, and for perhaps twenty minutes he groped up and down the rock. There wasn't a tree to be found and no shrub heavy enough for his purpose; but, back some distance, he discovered a rock with a girth equal to his encircling arms. Rising to his knees he tugged with all his might and loosened it from its bed. It took fully fifteen minutes to work the boulder to a point sufficiently near the cañon's rim to satisfy him, to brace it with smaller stones, and to securely hitch one end of his lariat around it. He paid out the loose end over the cliff, tested the anchorage with several hard pulls and then slipped over the edge and slid down the rope, hand over hand. "I hope she holds," he muttered. "If it don't I'll get a hard belt on the head."

A gunshot echoed remotely. Beneath, the water gurgled and hissed. The cliff wall became colder, damper, and he was cheered by the thought that the lariat would let him all the way to the stream. But in this he was due to be disappointed, for when his hands came to the last foot of the rope his heels dangled in the black space. It was an accident for which he had been partly prepared. He swung a moment, trying to fathom the distance below and swiftly debated. "Drop or climb back? Well, here's for a wet evenin'." He drew a breath, bunched his legs and let go the rope.

He had not been so much afraid of a long drop as of striking a rock, and when the ice-cold mountain water closed above him with a shock that seemed like a blow on the head he had a flash of relief. The current turned him over, and he felt that he was being dragged farther toward the bottom of the river. Then something roared in his ears and he found himself being shot to the surface with a crashing of waves on all hands. He struggled to keep control of his body, vainly essayed to swim; one futile stroke was all that he managed before he was swept, full force, against a rock, and felt a great streak of pain course through his leg. He was again sucked down, swallowing water, strangling, fighting to come up.

While descending the rope he had fixed firmly in his mind the necessity of keeping to the right side of the stream and gaining the shallows. And so now he thrashed blindly, half drowned, toward the dark, unseen point which he believed to be his destination. Time after time he was thrown up to gain a bit of air and then sucked down; being twisted and jerked and whirled continually until he at last gave up hope of ever reaching dry land. The thunder mounted in his head. It seemed as if he were being swept onward into some great boiling caldron, being plucked hither and thither by a more relentless

grip of the current. Traveling head-first he scooted over a boulder, barely grazing his head. Down he went, far down, then up—and down again. But a wave of hope overwhelmed him, for his feet touched gravel and when he rose he found himself firmly rooted, bent against the force of the water which came nearly to his armpits. Struggling with the treacherous footing inch by inch he groped shoreward and presently fell, face down, upon the dry ground. "A fool—for—luck!" he gasped.

He lay there for ten minutes or so, hearing the stream boom and mutter as it flung itself between the narrow cañon walls below. By and by he rose on his elbows and got painfully to his feet. From shoulder to heel on his right side, there appeared to be one continual bruise, the result of scraping over rocks. He stared around him, vainly trying to pierce the utter darkness of the vault-like place. "Got no way of knowin' where in Sam Scratch I am," he muttered, ruefully. "May be a mile below them, or plumb on the opposite side of the river. Got to find out, somehow."

He was soon given his bearings. Above the rush and steam of the current he heard a shot, apparently not far in front, and some distance overhead. He moved, wringing the water from his arms and loosening the revolver which, before embarking on his uncertain journey, he had taken pains to fasten securely. "Landed at the ford, all right," said he. "Road goin' up the hill must be right in front of me. If I find it, it'll bring me just behind those gents, providin' they ain't moved."

He advanced and presently his foot dropped into a rut. Leaning down and sweeping his hands from side to side he satisfied himself that he was really upon the trail and then continued, climbing up a rather sharp and winding grade. For the first few minutes he walked fast; but as the roar of the waters receded he took greater pains to muffle his steps. The opaque quality of the shadows seemed to lessen, and after what might have been a journey of a hundred yards or two hundred yards he was aware that the grade had vanished and that he stood on an open piece of ground with the wind blowing gently against his face. A question formed itself silently on his lips.

"Where?"

Every muscle of his body seemed to freeze. A horse whinnied, not thirty feet behind him; hard upon the heels of this signal he heard a body stirring uneasily in the immediate foreground. The tag end of a husky whisper reached him.

"Can't sneak by 'thout us hearin' him—too narrow."

"What's that shadow?"

A revolver spoke, throwing a small point of flame through the blackness. Then there was a scuffling of ground as if the two had moved out of range. The next whisper told Brent that they had retreated a few yards nearer to where he stood.

"Why don't he fight back?"

Brent dropped to the ground and drew his gun. Groping, he found a small rock. He hoisted it in the air and heard it fall somewhere to the front of the fugitives. It was the signal for a fresh outburst. Both fired, and from the points of flame Brent found their new location. He spread out on the grass and raised his voice. His remark was to the point.

"Got you boys covered. Better give up. Throw your guns away an' light a match."

He had not calculated they would give in to his order. He was not surprised, therefore, at the fresh volley of lead that sang around his neighborhood. One slug threw fresh dirt in his face and made him spit. He extended his weapon out from his body and blazed away, rolling from the shot. He heard

Qu'Arell's voice, raised angrily, amid gun flashes.

"How in dangnation did he git by?"

Brent aimed carefully and fired a second time. That bullet found a mark. Meeders cried in sudden agony: "I'm hit!" That exclamation, Brent decided, was too high-pitched to be false, and the decision was fortified later when the outlaw's breathing grew short and labored, punctuated by a remark to Qu'Arell. "Rixey—was—right! He —he ain't a man to fool with!" The last part came in a rush. Brent, listening carefully, heard the breathing die away.

"Qu'Arell," he called across the short space, "better throw that gun away and light a match."

There was an instant's silence. "Reckon he's dead," said Qu'Arell. "All right, I give up."

"Toss your gun away—and light a match."

Brent heard the gun fall in the distance. Presently a match flamed, and by it he saw Qu'Arell's unpleasant face settled in savage lines. "Lower the match so I can see Meeders," he requested. Qu'Arell complied and Brent, looking upon Meeders' staring countenance, knew the man was dead beyond a doubt. He issued another order, rising from the ground, "Now march back to your horse and get your lariat. I aim to tie you up like a chicken goin' to market."

Qu'Arell had not a word to say, but began a slow walk toward Brent. The latter stepped aside, letting his captive pass along toward the tethered horses. The match guttered in the wind. "Watch that!" warned Brent. "No rannies, now!" His warning came just as the match flickered out. He leaped aside, gun poised. Qu'Arell shouted something and tore across the ground. Brent felt the man's body bearing down and fired point-blank. The gun was nearly torn from his hand as Qu'Arell's mad rush carried him over backward, knocked the breath half from his body and slammed him against the ground. The outlaw's huge bulk fell atop his chest and a hand reached for his windpipe.

It was short and bitter, that midnight struggle. Brent felt the huge paw closing about his neck; a knee was digging cruelly into his stomach. Qu'Arell, fighting with all the violent rage at his command, cursed and snarled as he struck. Brent rolled, unseating his opponent, but he was not able to free the clutching fingers from his throat. He raised his gun, trying to use it, and was hindered by Qu'Arell's other hand. He heaved himself up from the ground and was jammed back again, while his lungs began to burn for want of air. It seemed that the big man would bear him down by sheer weight, and the thought lent him desperation. He swept his pistol away from the other's hand and, taking a blind chance, brought it forward with his full strength toward the general direction of Qu'Arell's head. It struck so close to his own face that he felt the blow as it went through the outlaw's body. The torturing grip on his neck was released, and he rose with fresh courage to press the battle.

But he had no need of it. The blow had put Qu'Arell out; he slumped to the ground without a word, and Brent, getting to his feet, ran swiftly toward the tethered horses. It took him only a moment to whip the lariat from one pommel and rush back to the still unconscious outlaw.

"That sure ends one evenin's labor!" he gasped. "And I ain't sorry. But no son of a gun can take me for a greenhorn. He rides back to Rawhide with me in the mornin'."

And when Qu'Arell woke he found himself, tightly bound, lying before a camp fire, with Lee Brent smoking a cigarette and gazing serenely at the distant stars.

Black Venom

By Reginald C. Barker

Author of "Twenty-five Hours a Day," etc.

CHAPTER I.

"I'M GLAD YOU CAME HOME."

NOBODY lived on the little ranch which lay between the Lazy Q and the X Bar Seven. The doors of the ranch house stood open, and bullets of passing riders had shattered the windows until only a few dagger-shaped fragments of glass hung from the edges of the weathered sashes; every tin can which lay around the dusty yard had been perforated by leaden slugs; and full of holes, a single joint of stovepipe leaned disconsolately above the gray, heat-curled shingles of a sagging roof.

The corrals, too, wore that look that comes to any work of man which for long has lain idle. In the center of one a magpie was perched on a snubbing post that was circled with the marks left by the tightening of a hundred ropes; black head tilted to one side and wise eye glittering like a jet bead, he peered at Bill McCune, who was drawing water from a well.

Where every other inanimate object bore one or more scars or holes from wanton bullets, the well alone had been immune. In that land of little water, no man had molested the rope that ran over a sheave hung beneath a crossarm above the well; no wandering bullet had trifled with either of the two small kegs, the weight of one of which on its way down, empty, helped to counterbalance the weight of the other rising, filled with ice-cold water from a depth of fifty feet below.

The magpie chattered volubly as McCune emptied the keg into a shallow wooden trough which had been built within reach of him who drew water. Standing by the trough, two horses low-

ered their noses and through velvety lips gratefully drank.

Twice the keg was filled, twice it was emptied into the trough, then as the horses raised their dripping muzzles, McCune filled a canvas water bag which he took from his saddle and himself drank long and deep.

"That's good water," he remarked to the horses as he leaned the water bag against the boxing which inclosed the well. "Just as cold as ever."

The horses paid no attention; with drooping heads they were waiting his pleasure. They were very tired, especially the one which that day had traveled twenty miles under the dead-weight of a hundred-and-fifty-pound pack.

Still perched on the snubbing post, the magpie laughed again. Scowling at the sound, the man quickly drew a six-shooter and fired. The magpie fell, three or four black-and-white feathers drifting to the ground. The two horses raised their heads at the sound of the shot; then pricked their ears forward and whinnied, for around the corral there came trotting another saddled but riderless horse. At sight of the strangers he stopped, raised his head, and whinnied too. For a moment the man stared at the strange beast, then, swearing, he sprang to his saddle and rode at a hand gallop in the direction from which the riderless steed had appeared.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "I believe I've shot a man!"

Behind a crooked-armed, ancient hackberry bush which had concealed the rider from his sight when shooting at the magpie, McCune found a girl lying prone. All that had saved her life had been the fact that the force of the bullet had been almost spent when it grazed her head.

McCune sprang from his saddle, and for an instant stood looking down at the victim of the accident; in his lean face was an expression of more than horror; rather it was that of a man who believed himself to be facing a situation which, in view of his past, could never be satisfactorily explained. A moment the fear gripped him, then he shook it off and, stooping, raised the girl in his arms, in his mental agony forgetful of the horse, who, with head held high to avoid stepping in the trailing bridle rein, slowly followed him back to the well.

The shock to the girl's brain had been very slight, and the water-soaked silk handkerchief was very cold, but to McCune ages passed in the few seconds which elapsed before he found himself gazing into a pair of violet eyes still shadowy with the mists of eternity.

"What happened?" she asked faintly. "Did Twister buck me off?"

"No," answered Bill McCune. "I shot you."

"You shot me?" She raised herself on one elbow and her eyes searched his face; she seemed to be struggling to remember something.

"The trick of a tenderfoot," he said bitterly. "I took a shot at a magpie without first assuring myself that there was nobody within range of my gun. I always hated the mocking laugh of a magpie; but I'm cured, I'll never shoot at one again."

There was sudden joy in her laugh as she staggered to her feet and steadied herself by placing a hand on his shoulder.

"I thought I recognized you," she said. "Now I'm sure of it. Don't you know me? Don't you remember the little girl who always came running to get you when a magpie showed himself around the corrals? Don't you remember me, Bill McCune?"

She dropped her eyes then, for his gaze was wandering from her dainty morocco riding boots up over her khaki skirt, past her gray flannel shirt with its bright silk neckerchief loose-knotted against the cream of her throat. His gray eyes came to rest on her hair,

tawny like a lion's mane in color, and fully as thick.

Back raced his memory through five dreary years, to a fifteen-year-old girl with a pigtail of tawny hair as long as his arm, clinging to the back of a sunfishing outlaw in the breaking corral of the Lazy Q.

"You're not," he said, "you can't be?"

"I am, though," she laughed. "I'm little Lorna Morrissey of the Lazy Q. And I'm glad, Bill McCune, glad you've come home."

"Can you ever forgive——" He glanced at her temple where the passing bullet had left its mark.

"There's nothing to forgive," she said, touching the wound tenderly with the tips of her fingers. "It might have happened to any one." She slipped the reins over her horse's head and swung into the saddle. Then she reached down a hand and for a moment let it rest lightly in his. "I'll have to be riding now. Good-by, Bill. I'm glad you're home. 'Jack-pot' will be glad, too; I'll send him over."

For a little while Bill McCune stood watching her as she rode away, then he turned and drew his horse's head down until the trembling muzzle touched his cheek.

At sunset, thundering into the yard on a wicked-eyed buckskin, came a wide-shouldered little man with a brick-red face. His high heels hit the ground before the bridle rein which he flung over his horse's head.

"You dog-goned or'nary ol' coyote!" shouted Jack-pot Jones as Bill McCune looked down at him with a whimsical smile on his lean face. Then the little man jumped high in the air, clicked both heels together, and flung his four-gallon hat skyward. "Durn your measly ol' hide, I'm glad you're back!"

Jack-pot Jones did the talking as they sat on the old porch which faced across a great valley, bounded at its northern end by the Owyhee Range, now sinking beneath the purple blankets of night. Bill McCune puffed at a cigarette and in silence listened to stories of what had happened while he had been away.

"'Bull' Storm still running the X Bar Seven?" he asked suddenly.

"Shore thing," grunted Jack-pot, "an' Judith, she ain't never married. Dog-gone it, Bill, I got a crick in my leg from settin' still so long. Now as I was sayin'——"

"Never mind trying to change the subject," admonished Bill McCune, laying a hand on one of the little man's wide shoulders. "Do the folks around here still believe I killed my brother?"

"Some of 'em do," admitted Jack-pot, casting aside the stub of his cigarette; "and again, some of 'em don't."

"Meaning that *you* don't," said Bill McCune.

"Nor none of the Lazy Q folks don't," stated Jack-pot, adding indignantly: "Think I'd be bustin' broncs for 'em if they did?"

"Did any one believe that I'd come back as soon as my time was up?" asked Bill McCune.

"Lorna Morrissey, she did," answered Jack-pot, "an' ol' Pop Morrissey, he did, or he wouldn't have gone to the trouble of runnin' your stock with the Lazy Q cattle, after your dad, old Thad McCune, died. As to Bull Storm of X Bar Seven and that gal of his, Judith, they——" But Bill McCune gripped his arm.

"Let it go at that," said he. "I understand."

Jack-pot Jones stretched his chaparajoed legs and yawned.

"See that yeller star a-ridin' over the top of yon butte?" he asked. "Same li'l' ol' yeller star we useter watch when we was night herdin' on the drive. Reck'n I'll be ridin' now. S'long, Bill."

Came the clink of spurs as the little man arose and made his bow-legged way across the yard to the corral. Followed the snort of a mean-dispositioned horse

hastily mounted, and a clatter of hoofs as the bronco twister whirled the buckskin back to the darkened porch from which the lighted end of a cigarette glowed red.

"Most fergot to tell you, Bill," he said, leaning from the saddle. "Lorna, she said to ride over to the Lazy Q come mornin'. Her pop wants to see you."

CHAPTER II.

"YOU CAN BANK ON ME."

IN a land where the faces of most men were tanned to a brick-red by the sun and wind of the open ranges, the complexion of "Pop" Morrissey was almost as gray as the neat goatee which, together with his immaculate shirt, soft collar, and bow tie, served at first glance to impress a stranger with the fact that here was a cattleman who was what is commonly called "different."

Sixty might have been the age of Pop Morrissey, but the years had added not an ounce of superfluous flesh to the long, spare form which rocked to and fro on the veranda of the Lazy Q ranch house. From beneath a wide-brimmed black beaver hat the mild, gray eyes of the cattleman gazed across the range, as he gave his orders for the day.

"Yeah," drawled Pop Morrissey in reply to a question from "Hasty" Owens, foreman of the Lazy Q. "Yeah, Hasty, I think you may as well start rounding up McCune's stock. Likely he'll want to know where he stands."

"Yonder he comes, now, Pop," said Hasty, shading his eyes. "Guess I'll be ridin'."

"Better have the boys corral a dozen head of horses, too, Hasty," ordered Morrissey as the bulky foreman rode away. "We won't miss 'em, and McCune will be needing a cavvy." Then the old man rose and stood awaiting Bill McCune as he slowly walked his bay toward the house.

"Welcome back to the Lazy Q." The old cattleman's hands quivered slightly as he grasped those of the tall rider. "Welcome home."

"Wonder you hadn't met me with a gun, Pop," McCune said, trying to hide his emotion beneath a jest. "How's Lorna getting along?"

"Lorna?" repeated her father. "Why, Lorna is all right, except that she became so excited over meeting you, that she ran smack into a hackberry bush and nearly knocked her head off."

"Did Lorna tell you that, Pop?" A flush crept over McCune's lean face, and in his eyes there shone a light that was beyond the understanding of the old cattleman.

"Told me? Why, of course, she told me," he exclaimed in surprise. "Nothing wrong about that, was there, my boy? You ought to be proud that my little girl thinks so much of you."

"I am," said McCune slowly, weighing his words, "proud that she thought enough of me not to have told you that I nearly killed her."

"What's that?" Pop Morrissey placed a hand to his heart and his face grew even paler than usual, as he sank heavily back into the rocker he had just vacated. "Tell me about it, boy," he commanded; "tell me the whole story. Omit nothing."

Leaning back in his chair with closed eyes, the old cattleman did not interrupt as McCune told of the accidental shooting of Lorna Morrissey. But when the recital was ended, he sat up very straight.

"I'm glad I heard it from your own lips, Bill," he said, "for in no other way could I have learned what a terrible shock it was to you." Arising, he placed his hands on the rider's shoulders and looked him in the face. "Let us thank the Boss of the Ranges who turned the bullet aside, Bill—and forget it."

Lorna came then with her mother, buxom, fair-haired, and clear-eyed despite her fifty years. Flour was on the

hand she placed in McCune's, and music was in her voice as she said:

"Lorny said you would be here, Bill; so we waited breakfast."

Between the girl and her mother, McCune entered the house; behind them followed the spare figure of Pop Morrissey with a hand still pressed to his heart.

Followed the clatter of knives and forks, and small talk of the range; talk in which they strove to make McCune feel at ease in the land from which he had been absent so long. And through it all he was wondering why Pop Morrissey had sent for him.

The real reason came out in Pop's office, a small room containing a desk, a couple of chairs, and on the walls two of Frederic Remington's paintings of life on the cattle range.

The old cattleman motioned McCune to a chair, then he seated himself, elevated his feet upon his desk, and leaned back.

"Tell me again," he said, "all you can remember about Vane."

"I'd rather forget it, Pop," said McCune slowly.

"No use trying to forget it, my boy," stated the old man; "neither you nor I will ever know any rest till we find out who killed your brother."

"That," said McCune, "is the real reason why I came back. I'm going to live on my little ranch between the Lazy Q and the X Bar Seven until I find out who killed my brother Vane and for five years let me suffer in prison. Think of it, Pop," he said, "five years! More than eighteen hundred days behind stone walls for a crime I never committed."

"Are you sure, Bill"—the keen old gray eyes never left those of the lean man facing him—"that you did not take the blame for the sake of a woman? Remember, I'm your friend as I was your father's before you. I'll stand by you to the last, but I want to know the truth."

"There was never anything between me and Judith Storm, Pop," said McCune simply. "My brother Vane was the one who loved her; she's not the type I could love."

"Then you haven't seen her since you came home?"

"I've seen nobody but you folks of the Lazy Q," answered McCune, "and so far as I know, nobody else has seen me."

"What did you and your brother fight over?" asked Pop Morrissey.

"I must refuse to answer that, Pop," said McCune, "just as I refused to answer the same question at my trial. All I know is that Vane took advantage of his greater age and weight and knocked me out. Bull Storm found Vane lying beside me with a bullet through his head."

"And your gun," added Pop Morrissey, "contained one empty cartridge. As I remember it, you claimed you shot at a magpie."

"I did," said McCune simply. "I hate the sight of 'em, but I'll never shoot at one again."

"Never is a long time," said Pop Morrissey, "a long, long time."

Removing his feet from the desk, the old cattleman sat silent so long that McCune wondered whether he had fallen into a doze. Suddenly he leaned over, straightened a pile of papers, and moved a paper weight, then apparently he came to a decision.

"What with the natural increase and all," he said, "I reckon there are about five hundred head of cattle running on the Lazy Q that belong to you. At thirty dollars a head on the hoof, that makes you worth about fifteen thousand dollars, not counting the value of the Little Ranch In Between. Likely in a little while the price of beef will take a rise, and you'll be pretty well fixed."

"It'll cost me a thousand to fix up the old place," McCune reminded him, "and I'll have to buy a cavvy, and—well,

say another thousand to get things in running shape."

Pop Morrissey tapped with the end of a pencil on the desk and said thoughtfully:

"Three hundred and twenty acres isn't enough land for a man with your prospects, Bill. What do you say to throwing your stock and holdings into the Lazy Q, in return for a half interest in the ranch?"

"You mean"—McCune sat up very straight—"that you'd give me a half interest in your fourteen hundred acres, to say nothing of the two thousand head of stock running under your brand?"

Pop Morrissey laid a hand on the knee of the man facing him.

"Bill," he said, "I'm going to tell you something I've never breathed to any one. Of late my heart has been buck jumping like a skittish colt. Last time I went to Boise I had Doc Ewart look me over, and he says I'm likely to go out at most any time."

In the silence that comes to a man when he feels there is nothing he can say, McCune could hear the ticking of the watch in Pop Morrissey's pocket.

"If I had a son," came the quiet, measured tones, "I wouldn't care so much, but the way it is, I am afraid to go and leave mother and my little girl to face things alone. That's why I want you to have an interest in the Lazy Q, Bill, when I join the Last Big Round-up. I was hoping that maybe, after a while, you and Lorna——"

The old man ceased speaking and sat watching McCune as slowly he rolled a cigarette and placed it between his lips.

"It wouldn't be right of me to accept your offer, Pop," said McCune at last, "till I've cleared the cloud from my name."

"I told you before," said Pop Morrissey, "that I don't believe you killed your brother. Neither does mother believe it, nor Lorna. It will all be cleared up in time."

"It isn't what you believe, Pop. It's what the world believes. Suppose that Lorna did come to care for me, she's young now and couldn't possibly realize; but suppose—suppose there should be children?"

"I guess you're right, Bill," acknowledged Pop Morrissey. "I hadn't thought of that; maybe it's because I'm getting old. But leaving Lorna out of it, couldn't you see your way clear to accept my offer?"

"For five years I've been planning what I'd do if I lived to return," said McCune. "I'm the last of the McCunes, and if dad were living he would want me to stay on the place he homesteaded and find out who killed my brother, Vane. So I'm going back to the Little Ranch In Between."

Pop Morrissey sighed as he realized the justice of McCune's argument; then he pulled out his check book.

"You'll be needing something with which to meet expenses until you get things to going, Bill," he said. "If you make good, you can repay me when you can spare the money. If things go against you, just forget this check and take care of mother and Lorna if anything should happen to me."

"You can bank on me, Pop," said Bill McCune.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN-KILLER.

SEATED on the top rail of the breaking corral at the Little Ranch In Between, Jack-pot Jones watched critically a black horse racing around inside with head held high and wicked eyes gleaming with malice.

"If Pop Morrissey knowed that Hasty Owens sent you Black Venom with that bunch we just broke," he remarked to Bill McCune, "he'd be madder than a wet hen."

"Bad one?" asked McCune.

"Man-killer, an' you know it," retorted Jack-pot. "Better put a bullet

between his eyes before he gets one of us."

"I reckon I'll try him a whirl, just the same," said McCune quietly. "Maybe he isn't so dangerous as he looks. I've a notion that if he were broken to the saddle, he could show heels to anything in Idaho."

"You're a blame fool, Bill," snorted the little twister. "After being offn the range five years, yuh ain't got no more chance of stayin' with him than a jack rabbit has of whippin' a coyote. Why, dog-gone it, I seen you hunt leather twice while you was ridin' the li'l' sorrel."

"Just the same," insisted McCune, "I'm going to try Black Venom a whirl."

"Look here, Bill"—Jack-pot Jones thrust out an aggressive chin—"since I quit the Lazy Q and went in cahoots with you, I aim to do what twistin' is necessary on the Little Ranch In Between. Git your rope, we'll bust him wide open to take some of the meanness out of him; then we'll throw a saddle on him, an' I'll try him out."

"You can do the busting wide open if you like, Jack-pot," said McCune, "but I aim to ride Black Venom myself."

Grumbling to himself, but realizing that further argument would be useless, Jack-pot Jones clambered down and took his rope from where it hung coiled on his saddle.

"Have your own way, you blamed fool," he said, "but if that black devil kills you, what will I tell Lorna?"

McCune ceased examining his rope for flaws and looked up. In his heart he was wishing he had not been so stubborn; for he knew just as well as Jack-pot that he was in no condition to ride such a horse as the outlaw, Black Venom. For the first time he found himself wondering how it happened that Pop Morrissey had allowed the outlaw to be included in the string of range horses which had been sent over to the Little Ranch In Between. Yet, after what he had said, not even though Jack-pot Jones was his best friend, would McCune have backed down.

"There won't be any need to tell her anything," he replied. "Lorna will understand."

Jack-pot Jones grunted in disgust; then he climbed inside the bars of the corral with a hungry loop held wide.

Black Venom screamed as only a man-killing horse can scream, when he realized that a human being was within his reach. With neck outstretched, ears laid flat to his skull, and yellow teeth bared, he charged, and for a moment it looked bad for Jack-pot. Then suddenly the great horse swerved, for, realizing that Jack-pot could not rope the outlaw's front legs with the animal charging head-on, McCune had hurled a clod, which, striking Black Venom just above the eye, had for a moment diverted him from his murderous purpose. And in that instant Jack-pot's loop jerked Black Venom's front feet from under him so suddenly that the great horse pitched end over end. His sweeping tail lashed his captor's face as the little twister rolled to safety beneath the bars.

Then McCune's rope got in its work around the hind legs of the frantic horse, and, helpless under the skillful manipulation of the two riders, the outlaw was blindfolded, saddled, and led outside the corral to where the gray sage stretched in a level expanse toward the foothills of the blue Owyhees.

With one hand Jack-pot loosened his gun in its holster and with narrowed eyes closely watched the black horse, but under his blindfold the outlaw stood passively waiting; only by the quivering of the muscles which rippled beneath the satin skin of the magnificent brute might one have guessed at the fear and rage boiling in his heart.

"I've rode my share of horses," said Jack-pot Jones, "some of 'em good, some of 'em bad, an' a few of 'em reg'lar

hellions. But I aim to tell you that I ain't pinin' to straddle that bunch of black deviltry. If once you get near them hoofs, Bill, I'm goin' to shoot quick and straight and save you from going to a country where they don't wear chaps."

"Too bad we haven't got a couple more fellows to ride herd with you, Jack-pot," said McCune, as he hit the saddle, "but let him go."

The legs of the outlaw bunched as he felt McCune's weight, then Jack-pot cast off the blindfold and swung aside, and for just a moment Black Venom stood quivering.

Wham! McCune's hat hit the outlaw across the side of the face. The next instant the hat was torn from the rider's grasp as the snaky head darted around, and only by meeting the ugly mouth with the slash of a spurred heel did the rider avoid those gnashing yellow teeth.

Up in the air Black Venom went, dancing on his hind legs. As he fished for the sun, McCune's quirt brought him down to earth again, and he bunched all four feet, lowered his head, and spun like a top in the measure of his own length. Then he broke into a series of cat-backed jumps which tossed his rider like a cork on the crest of a wave, but at the end of a hundred yards McCune was still in the saddle, though bleeding freely from the nose.

"Ride 'er, cowboy!" yelled Jack-pot as he raced alongside the black.

McCune did not hear him, did not catch the note of fear in the little twister's voice. For Black Venom had ceased bucking and with a sudden burst of speed which left Jack-pot far behind was racing toward a round-topped hill a quarter of a mile away.

For the span of a breath McCune thought he had conquered, then suddenly he remembered how outlaw horses sometimes employed the pinwheel to throw a rider when all else had failed, and with all the strength of his sinewy arms he strove to turn the furious animal, but he might as well have tried to turn the wind that hurtled past his ears. Straight as a pigeon in flight the outlaw raced for the hill; up it he thundered without faltering, and then——

As they reached the crest, Black Venom caught himself in his stride and slowed, then he burst on in a forward and upward jump which turned him feet upward in the air and landed him half stunned on his back on the rocky summit beside the teetering figure of the man, who by the grace of a quick brain had leaped from the saddle just in time to avoid being crushed to death.

Shaken and bruised, beyond coherent speech, McCune waited until the outlaw had scrambled to his feet; then slowly and painfully he climbed into the saddle. Black Venom did not move; not even when the hissing quirt slashed him across the rump did he attempt to buck.

Instead he turned his head and looked long and earnestly at his rider, as though in acknowledgment that he had met his match.

Madly spurring up the hill came Jack-pot, and by his side, mounted on a chestnut of Morgan strain, rode a girl, who even in the saddle looked tall. Dark of eye and imperious, she drew rein and looked at McCune as he made an involuntary motion to remove the hat he had lost.

"Aren't you glad to see me, Bill?" she purred in a low, almost caressing voice.

"You haven't changed much, Judith," said McCune, evading her question.

"You always could ride, Bill," said Judith Storm. "Do you remember the last ride we took together? The moonlight on the Owyhees and the scent of the sage?"

It seemed to Jack-pot as he watched the almost broken rider on the black horse, that a gleam of dismay shone for a moment in the eyes of Bill McCune.

"By your leave, ma'am," said Jack-

pot, "I'll be dustin' along an' see if I c'n find Bill's hat."

Idly flicking her boot with the tip of her quirt and biting her full red lips, Bull Storm's daughter looked at Bill McCune, but, apparently forgetful of her presence, the tall rider remained silent. She wondered what his thoughts were, as he stared at the shadows racing across the purple sage to the blue Owyhees.

"Why did you ride Black Venom?" asked Judith at last. "Didn't you know that he has the reputation of being a man-killer?"

"If he could only speak," said McCune, "I wonder what he'd say."

A rider from childhood, Judith Storm knew horses, and as her eyes swept the short-coupled back and the lithe muscles rippling down the slim, black legs of the partly tamed outlaw, she recognized him for a born racer, and wanted him for her own.

Black Venom humped his back once or twice in a half-hearted way as at the side of Judith's chestnut McCune rode him back to the ranch, but his rider paid no more attention to his buck jumps than he did to the dark beauty who, riding at his side, reminded him of things he would rather have forgotten.

Brought up by her father, who had become a widower at her birth, through a spoiled and petted childhood which had given her the gratification of every wish, Judith had arrived at womanhood with the idea that, as Bull Storm was wont to remark, "Jude thinks she has only to lift her little finger an' the world will come a-runnin'."

Running it came, to lay at her feet the pick of the riders of the Owyhee ranges. And she laughed with them and danced with them and led them on to love her before she sent them away. Judith Storm knew whom she wanted. But she didn't know Bill McCune. For though he had danced with her, ridden with her, flirted with her, and once kissed her, she had never been able to stir the deeper feelings in his heart which might have made him hers. In the form of Bill McCune, Judith's world was passing her by.

The chestnut whinnied as they reached the line fence, and the man on the black outlaw looked up and saw that they were nearly home.

"S'long, Judith," he said. "Good-by."

"You'll come over as soon as you can?" Shadows of the flames within her drifted through the dark eyes. "I'll be waiting for you, Bill."

Suddenly he leaned over in his saddle and caught her by both wrists. She made no resistance, rather a hope of happiness leaped into her shadowy eyes and almost she leaned toward him. Then, as she saw his eyes, with unexpected strength she wrenched free her wrists, and touched the chestnut with her heel. Across the space between the two horses the man and girl looked into each other's eyes.

"Who killed Vane?" asked Bill McCune.

Above the crimson silk which encircled her throat he could see a little pulse beating, beating. Coal-black, her eyes stared at him out of her blood-drained face. Then she whirled and fled.

CHAPTER IV.

BULL STORM.

THERE was new glass in the windows at the house at the Little Ranch In Between, and gray smoke pouring from a new stovepipe above the roof. On the floor of the porch a saddle lay upside down, with a sunbeam dancing on its sweat-stained lining.

By mutual consent Bill McCune and Jack-pot Jones had decided that a cook stove in the kitchen and a couple of beds in the big-windowed living room would afford them all the comforts they required during the few short hours they spent beneath a roof.

It was Jack-pot's turn to do the cooking. In the kitchen, with sleeves rolled above his freckled forearms, he was cutting out biscuit dough with the top of a baking-powder can. On the stove coffee was hopping up and down beneath the glass top of a percolator, and in a frying pan, floured and ready, thick steaks were awaiting the attention of the cook.

Sauntering into the kitchen came McCune. He had discarded his chaps and vest, and with his gray flannel shirt open at the throat, and his fair hair slicked back from his forehead, he looked little the worse for his session with Black Venom.

"Better set another plate, Jack-pot," he drawled; "seems like we're going to have company."

Jack-pot slid a pan of biscuits in the oven, then slammed the door, and looked up quickly; for in the voice of his tall partner he had detected a note that seemed to speak of trouble.

"Who is it?" asked Jack-pot. "Bull Storm?"

"Uh-huh."

Before McCune could say more, the door of the kitchen opened and admitted a dark-faced man with the stature of a giant and only one ear.

"Evenin'," said Bull Storm. "Eatin'?"

He made no offer to shake hands nor did he extend a welcome to the man against whom he had been the chief witness five years before. Appearing doubly huge in his black Angora chaps he stood in the doorway, moving his ponderous jaws to and fro, like an animal chewing its cud, and staring at McCune with heavy-lidded black eyes.

"Chuck will be ready in a few minutes, Mr. Storm," said McCune. "Glad to have you eat with us."

The giant cattleman's eyes narrowed at that "Mister." It wasn't the customary way for a rider to address a neighbor he had known all his life. But for reasons of his own Bull Storm decided to let it pass.

"I've et," he grunted, as a chair creaked ominously beneath his weight. Still moving his jaws to and fro, he nodded ponderously toward Jack-pot, who was opening the oven door.

"Pardner o' yours?" he asked. "Or just ridin' for you?"

"Both," replied McCune. "Between the two of us we aim to make a go of the Little Ranch In Between."

Bull Storm set his heel on an ant that was carrying off a grain of sugar.

"Jude says you rode Black Venom to a finish," he remarked.

"Guess he'll be gentled in a week or so," admitted McCune.

"Huh," grunted Bull Storm, "ain't another man in Idaho could have done it."

"Seems to me," remarked Jack-pot Jones quietly, "I heard that it was you who was the cause of him 'goin' bad' when he was a colt."

"If it hadn't been for Jude," growled Bull Storm, "he'd have been food for the coyotes long ago. Jude, she allowed that Black Venom was too good a horse to shoot, and that some day he would be gentled. But after what he done to my ear, I didn't want him around, so I gave Black Venom to Pop Morrissey."

"He's mine now," said Bill McCune. "I paid Pop twenty dollars a head for a dozen range horses; Black Venom was among them."

"Jude wants him," said Bull Storm, "and I ain't never refused her anything yet, so I'm offering you two hundred and fifty cold cash for Black Venom the day he's gentled enough for Jude to ride him."

"I reckon you've come to the wrong place, Mister Storm," said McCune mildly. "I broke Black Venom for myself, and he isn't for sale."

The giant lumbered to his feet and hitched up his chaps.

"Suit yourself, McCune," he said

gruffly; "Jude's bound to have Black Venom for her own, and she always gets what she wants."

It seemed to Jack-pot that hidden in the big cattleman's words lay a subtle threat. He wondered if McCune had noticed it too.

Slowly the smiling gray eyes of the tall rider were raised until they bored into those of the giant half turned in the doorway.

"Just the same," said Bill McCune, "Jude will never ride Black Venom."

A cloud of blue smoke arose from the stove as the door slammed behind Bull Storm, and Jack-pot made a dive for the frying pan.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "I've burned the steak to a cinder."

With his elbows resting on his knees, McCune stared at the floor. His face was creased with the expression of a man who was trying to solve a cross-word puzzle; but the puzzle intriguing him was one of those which life sometimes hands out.

"Did you see Bull put his foot on the ant that was carrying away a grain of sugar?" he asked Jack-pot.

"Uh-huh," grunted Jack-pot through a mouthful of hot biscuit. "Mashed the son of a gun to a grease spot."

McCune shook his head and pointed at the floor where, with two legs missing and a wrenched back, the little black ant was slowly backing away.

"Well, I'll be darned," exclaimed Jack-pot Jones; "he's still holding on to his sugar!"

"I was watching Bull Storm's eyes when he tried to crush the ant," said McCune, "and do you know, Jack-pot, I had a notion that Bull was thinking of me."

"You ain't no ant, Bill," said Jones in bewilderment.

"What I mean to say is," explained McCune patiently, "that to Bull Storm the ant and the sugar represented me and the Little Ranch In Between. When he crushed the ant he was thinking of what he intended to do to me and my ranch."

"You mean, Bill, that Bull Storm aims to get a hold of this place?"

"He's always wanted it," replied McCune. "Just why, I don't know. When dad was alive, Bull Storm tried his best to induce him to sell. I often asked dad why he didn't sell out and move somewhere else, for, small as it is, and situated between the Lazy Q and the X Bar Seven, this place will never cut much figure as a cattle ranch. But for some reason dad would never tell me just what held him to it."

"If it can't be made to pay," said Jack-pot, "why don't you sell it?"

"I suspect dad had a good reason for refusing to sell," replied McCune, "so I'm going to hang on to the ranch just like that ant is holding on to his sugar."

"Darned if he ain't going to make it, too," exclaimed Jack-pot. "Look, here comes his partner."

Running up to the crippled ant came another one. For a moment he reared up and with his antennæ appeared to hold a conversation with the ant holding the sugar. Then he dropped to his feet and with the front of his head shoved against the sugar still held in his companion's jaws; thus with one ant backing away and the other shoving, the two ants disappeared with their prize.

"Ride 'er!" yelled Jack-pot irrelevantly. Then suddenly he fell quiet and scratched his flaming head.

"Say, Bill," he drawled, "did you say you was the first ant, an' the sugar was the Little Ranch In Between?"

"Just a notion, I guess," said McCune; "perhaps I was wrong."

"Bill," said Jack-pot Jones, "you don't need to get a swelled head over it, for I'm going to be an ant, too, and the devil take Bull Storm."

That was all that was said about a partnership which has since become an epic of the Idaho cattle range. Cover-

ing a yawn with a lean, brown hand, McCune shoved back his chair from the supper table.

"Get your mouth harp, Jack-pot," he said, "and play a tune or two while I wrastle with the dishes."

The harmonica shrieked in agony as the little twister ran his lips along it from end to end to assure himself that there were no strained reeds. Then, sitting on one corner of the table, Jack-pot swung one short leg to and fro and, cupping one hand to an end of the little instrument at his lips, began to play vigorously.

The tin plates and cups clattered as Bill McCune herded them into the dish-pan. Then, suddenly, the clattering ceased, and the tall rider stood silent, listening to the music that filled the room.

Soft and low it came out of the soul of Jack-pot Jones like the sound of the free wind of morning that whispers to the sage. Then, like the wind, the music rose in volume, and into it crept the lowing of cattle, the hoarse cries of riders, and the rumble-rumble of a distant chuck wagon. Lower the music sank, and the sound of the trampling hoofs and the rumbling of the wagon died away as the herd wound its way toward the blue Owyhees. Again the tune quickened, and into the little kitchen flared the camp fire, with its group of reclining men, laughing and singing their songs of the range. Night now, and a thousand head of cattle resting beneath a wandering moon. Into the picture came a rider, slowly circling around the sleeping herd, singing, singing.

"I will not see my mother
When the work is done this fall."

"Oh, shucks!" exclaimed Jack-pot Jones, wiping his harp on the corner of his blue "silk." "What's the use?" And the kitchen became a kitchen again as the wild, sad music ceased.

"Let's go out on the porch and smoke," said McCune.

Through the milk-white moonlight they could see the Owyhees very far away. Somewhere a cow was calling to a calf that had wandered from her side, somewhere a coyote was howling. Over all hung the scent of the sage, bitter with its desert memories, sweet with its love of the land it clothed; the land so cruel to those who hated it, so kind to those who were kind.

"Glad you're back?" asked Jack-pot suddenly.

McCune almost jumped. Funny that the little twister should have spoken the very words he was thinking.

"Uh-huh," grunted McCune, "I sure——"

Then they both sprang to their feet and ran for the corrals, for smashing the silence of the summer night had come the snort of an alarmed horse.

"It's Black Venom!" yelled Jack-pot.

"Look out, here he comes!" warned McCune.

Reaching out a long arm, he grasped the little twister by the collar and swung him out of the path of the great black horse which was thundering past on his way back to freedom.

CHAPTER V.

HE GENERALLY GETS WHAT HE WANTS.

THERE was nothing they could do until morning, and so for a minute McCune and Jack-pot stood in silence looking at the great black bulk fleeing across the moonlit sage. Straight as an arrow Black Venom ran toward the line fence; then they saw his huge body rise in the air, and they heard the dull impact of his hoofs when they struck the ground on the opposite side of the fence. For a moment the great horse was stopped, then he regained his stride. On through the golden moonlight he sped, straight to the knoll where only a few hours before he had done his best to throw his

rider. There again he stopped and stood for a second silhouetted against the yellow moon. Raising his head, he whistled loud and long. From somewhere afar off came the whinny of a mare.

"I'll bet you we have a great time catching him again," remarked Jack-pot Jones. "How d'you reckon he happened to break out?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," said McCune as he strode toward the corral.

"Are you sure you put up those bars?" asked Jack-pot.

McCune stood silent for a moment staring at the two top bars, which had been withdrawn from their places and were lying on the ground just inside the corral.

"Seems like I remember putting 'em up," he said thoughtfully, "but maybe I got to thinking of something else. Anyhow, that's where Black Venom got out. Seeing as there are no other horses in the corral, we may as well leave the bars where they lay, and go to bed."

Unsuspicious of any ulterior motive, Jack-pot turned his back with the intention of returning to the house. He did not see McCune as quickly he stooped and picked from the ground a kerchief of crimson silk, such as Judith Storm had been wearing around her throat.

"Yeah," drawled Jack-pot Jones, "reck'n we'd better hit the hay, for we'll have a hard day to-morrow."

"I reckon perhaps you had better work on repairing the fences in the morning, Jack-pot," suggested McCune; "I've got one or two things to attend to that'll likely take me all day."

"You mean that you ain't goin' to make an effort to catch Black Venom again?" asked Jack-pot in surprise.

"We'll catch him all right," asserted McCune, "but I've got something more important to attend to first."

"Now I wonder," inquired Jack-pot of the moon, "whatever that can be?"

Not choosing to elucidate, McCune rolled a cigarette, and silence fell on the Little Ranch In Between until the coyotes began to yap at the dawn.

Jack-pot regarded his partner curiously as they swallowed their hot cakes and coffee. It seemed to the little twister that McCune had the appearance of one who has spent a sleepless night.

"Say," burst out Jack-Pot Jones suddenly, "you don't suppose it was Bull Storm who turned Black Venom loose, do you, Bill?"

"I was wondering how long it would be before you thought of that," drawled McCune with a slow smile.

"Soon's we've et," said Jack-pot, "I'm goin' to drift down to the corral an' see if I can pick up his tracks."

"You may as well save yourself the trouble," said McCune. "I think I know who turned Black Venom loose. I guessed it last night, but I didn't tell you, because it's a matter which I shall have to handle alone, and I wanted time to think it over."

"I figured you'd been doing more thinkin' than sleepin'," commented the little twister as he rolled a cigarette. "Who was it?"

McCune did not answer, but quietly threw down on the table the crimson silk he had found. Flaming with the color of a bunch of June roses among the tin plates and cups, it seemed to challenge the two men.

"Now ain't that just like Jude?" exclaimed Jack-pot. "I'll bet after Bull Storm told her you wouldn't sell the black horse, she just r'ared right up and hollered something tremendous. Holy smoke, ain't she goin' to be on the prod when she finds she's lost her silk! Just wait!"

"She couldn't have lost it," pointed out McCune. "You see, it is still knotted together at the corners. She must have taken it off on purpose and left it lying where I found it so as I'd know who turned Black Venom loose.

It was just the trick of a spiteful girl who knows she's playing safe."

"I bet a nickel," said Jack-pot Jones, "Jude will be layin' around all day waiting for you to come ridin' up to the ranch with that silk an' all set to raise Cain with her about Black Venom."

"Right there is where she is going to find out her mistake," said Bill McCune. "We'll catch the black horse again when we get good and ready; meanwhile we'd better ignore the whole matter." Picking up the crimson silk, McCune stuffed it into a pocket. "Reckon I'll be riding over to the Lazy Q," he said; "I've got a little business to talk over with Pop Morrissey. See you to-night, Jack-pot."

From the top of the knoll where he had last seen Black Venom, McCune drew rein and looked back.

From there he could see Jack-pot just riding away from the corrals, and the little twister's voice drifted up to him in song:

"My Lulu is an angel, but she never wears
her wings,
'Cause wings ain't just the proper things to
wear——"

"I wonder," said McCune to his horse, "whether Jack-pot will ever fall in love."

While the escape of Black Venom annoyed McCune, he felt no particular resentment against Judith Storm. Having known the girl from childhood, he was more inclined to lay the blame on the father who, by granting her every wish, had fostered her self will and capriciousness. Looked at in the right way, McCune knew that Judith's action in releasing the black outlaw had been that of a spoiled child. Such a futile revenge, too, for Judith must have known that the recapture of Black Venom would, at most, occupy but a short time. Knowing little of women, McCune failed to gauge rightly the depths of the nature of a girl who by the flinging down of her crimson silk on the bars of the corral had virtually declared war. That Judith Storm believed herself in love with him, McCune had always known, but that she was of the kind who will use almost any means to gain her end, he did not dream, and had any one told him so he would only have laughed.

It was only seven miles from the Little Ranch In Between to the Lazy Q, but engrossed in thought, McCune rode so slowly that it was after ten o'clock when he drew rein in front of the big porch where Pop Morrissey sat in his favorite rocker.

"Well," exclaimed the old cattleman, "look who's here! I guessed you'd be back after you had considered my proposition. Going to take me up on it?"

"No," said McCune. "I'm still determined to run my own iron. I came to ask you if I could borrow a couple of hands to help me catch Black Venom again. He got out of the corral last night, and headed back to the hills."

"What's that?" In evident astonishment Pop Morrissey gripped the arms of the rocker and half raised himself. "What are you talking about, Bill?"

"Why," replied McCune, "Jack-pot and I broke the black horse to the saddle, but that same night he got out of the corral."

"But how did you happen to get hold of him in the first place?" asked Pop Morrissey in perplexity. "Black Venom wasn't in that bunch of cayuses I sent down to you."

"He sure was," contradicted McCune. "At least we found him in the corral with the rest of 'em."

The old cattleman rose to his feet and placed a hand on McCune's shoulder.

"I guess you know me well enough to believe me," he said, "when I tell you that I've never seen Black Venom since the day years ago when he tried to kill Bull Storm. If the outlaw was in your corral, he was put there by some one

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who knew you would try to ride him and expected that you would be killed."

"I don't know of any one who would be benefited by my death," said McCune thoughtfully, "so why would any one try to kill me?"

Pop Morrissey sank back in his rocker and placed a hand to his heart as though he were laboring under undue excitement.

"Who'd fall heir to the Little Ranch In Between if you were to die without making a will?" he demanded.

"Why, I don't know," acknowledged McCune. "I have no heirs. I am the last of the McCunes."

"Well, I'll tell you, boy," said Pop Morrissey, "the ranch would become the property of the State, and after a certain length of time it would be auctioned off to the highest bidder."

"Yeah," drawled McCune, "I reckon it would. I hadn't thought of that. Dog-gone it, I guess it's up to me to make a will."

"Sounds kind of funny to hear a young man like you talk of making a will," said Pop Morrissey, "but in view of what you've told me, I guess it's the safest thing you can do unless in the event of your death you would want the Little Ranch In Between to fall into the hands of Bull Storm. For if it were auctioned off, nobody else would stand a chance against him. He's wanted your place ever since he and your old dad first came into the country forty years ago. And being to-day the richest man in this part of the State, Bull Storm most generally gets what he wants."

"You think then," said McCune, "that it was Bull Storm who had Black Venom put in my corral while Jack-pot and I were absent?"

"I don't care to make any accusations," replied Pop Morrissey, "but I know that he wants your place."

"So do you, Pop," said McCune bluntly. "But why?"

"If I were to tell you, Bill," said the old cattleman, "I might raise a whole lot of false hopes. So I'm going to keep still and let you find that out for yourself. But you can rest assured of one thing, which is that I don't aim to do you dirt. Now, I've got no right to ask, but because I've known you ever since you were a child, perhaps you'll tell me who you are going to make your beneficiary."

"Huh?" inquired McCune.

"If you do make a will," elucidated Pop Morrissey, "to whom are you going to leave the Little Ranch In Between?"

"Why"—Bill McCune ran a hand through his hair in perplexity—"seems to me I'd better leave it to Lorna."

Came a clatter of hoofs then, and McCune raised his eyes expectantly. But if he hoped to see Lorna Morrissey, he was disappointed, for the horse that trotted up to the porch was a chestnut of Morgan strain, and the dark-eyed rider who looked down at him from a silver-mounted saddle of hand-tooled leather was Judith Storm.

CHAPTER VI.

RIVALRY.

IT seemed to McCune that a shadow darkened Pop Morrissey's fine eyes, as with old-fashioned courtesy he arose and, doffing his hat, offered Judith his chair.

"Probably you two will have a lot to say to each other," said the old cattleman, "and seeing as you must be tired and thirsty, I'll go draw a bucket of cold water from the well. You know," he added with pardonable pride, "it is not very often that the well of the Lazy Q goes dry."

"I wish I could say as much for ours, Pop," said Judith. "Every summer we run short of water on the X Bar Seven, and I guess since Bill has come back, we'll be shorter than ever, for as I came over here, I saw Jack-pot repairing the fences on the Little Ranch In Between.

That will work quite a hardship on our stock, for during the dry season, while Bill was away, they could always go there to water."

While she had not as yet addressed McCune, he knew that the words were directed at him, and suddenly a great light broke upon him. So that was the reason that both Pop Morrissey and Bull Storm were trying to gain possession of his little ranch. By getting rid of him, one or the other of the two great ranches would gain control over the only well south of the Owyhee Range that never had been known to go dry. Year after year on the Little Ranch In Between, the water in the well remained at the same level, except, as had once happened within the memory of McCune himself, when without any apparent reason the water had risen steadily until it had overflowed the top of the coping, and rushed away in a crystal stream across the purple sage. The overflow had lasted more than a week. Then as suddenly as the water had risen, just as swiftly had it fallen until it had regained its normal level, fifty feet below the surface of the ground.

McCune had been but a little boy when the phenomenon had occurred, and, boylike, he had not given any thought to the wonder of it all. To him, then, the overflow racing across the desert had been but an added source of amusement in the opportunities it had offered for bathing facilities in that land of little water. But now, as his thoughts raced backward across the years, he remembered a night when Bull Storm had visited old Thad McCune, and had sat with him on the porch for hours talking. Fragments of the conversation he had overheard came back to McCune now, fraught with a significance which in his boyhood days had been far beyond his understanding.

"Subterranean river—great pressure ——" Bull Storm had been saying.

"Big flow of water—the coming of nesters—farms—alfalfa — fences——" had been part of old Thad McCune's reply. "Don't want artesian water—too much of it—would mean the passing of the cattle range around here—maybe after I'm dead and gone—not before!"

Suddenly Judith Storm's voice broke into his thoughts, and he became aware that they were alone. She had dismounted and was standing near him, looking up into his face with her dark, passionate eyes.

"What must you be thinking of me?" she murmured.

From his great height McCune looked down at the eloquent face framed in its dark hair. Subconsciously he noted the petulant droop to the full, red lips, and the dimple that cleft the strong chin. It was a willful face, he decided; a daring face, that of a girl who in the heights of a temper which had never known control, might do things for which afterward she would be sorry. Yet, paradoxically he knew that from the very nature of her, Judith Storm could never stoop to perform a really mean and underhanded act. And the freeing of Black Venom could not be construed as a mean act any more than could the attempt of the black outlaw to throw his rider. Both the act of the horse and the act of the girl in freeing him were but natural, considering the fact that neither had ever known control.

"Why did you do it, Jude?" he asked at last. "Why did you free Black Venom?"

"While you were away," she said softly, "I used to spend hours watching him, as he led his band among the hills. I wanted him so badly, but dad said he was a man-killer, and forbade all the boys to catch him for me. Then when you came home, suddenly dad changed his mind, and sent out some of the boys to catch him, and had him turned into your corral with the horses you bought from Pop Morrissey. 'If any one can break Black Venom,' said dad, 'it'll be

Bill McCune.' Then, when you refused to sell him, I got mad and came over and turned him loose. But I'm sorry, Bill, and I'll help you catch him again if you'll let me. I can take you right to where he stays most of the time; it's a little valley on the north side of Owyhee Cañon. Let's go and catch him again, Bill. Just you and I."

She looked down, then, slapping her knee with the tip of her quirt, and tapping the floor of the porch with the toe of her boot, while she awaited his answer.

It was long in coming. Not that there was anything unusual in her suggestion that they two hunt for Black Venom. For on the range it is not uncommon for a cowgirl and a cowboy to ride together.

Yet McCune sensed within him that Judith's real interest did not altogether lie in the capture of Black Venom, but rather she was using that as a subterfuge by which to lure him out among the drowsy cañons and purple sage where he would be less insensible to her personal attractions. It was not that McCune possessed any exalted sense of his own desirability, it was merely that from childhood he had known Judith Storm better than she knew herself, and in knowing her had come to fear that in the end she might win her desire.

"I guess," he said at last, "I'll have to leave Black Venom run the hills for a while; I'm too busy to hunt him up now."

Instantly Judith's mood changed, and a frown of displeasure crinkled her forehead as she whirled on him with flashing eyes.

"'Fraid of a girl!" she exclaimed. "You coward!"

Level-eyed he met her furious glance, and when he spoke, his voice was low and soft like the sound of the breeze through the sage at dawn.

"You've got me wrong, Jude; I'm afraid of myself."

She knew then that she could never have her way with him, and knowing it, thought for a moment that she hated him, and so she spoke to hurt.

"I'll bet if it had been Lorna Morrissey who had asked you, Bill, you couldn't have said 'yes' too quick."

"Suppose we leave Lorna's name out of this, Jude," he suggested, but the flash of his eye gave him away, and she whirled on him again.

"Think I haven't seen you watching and listening at every sound, hoping that she'd come? Do you think I'm a fool, Bill McCune?"

"Not a fool, Jude," he said, "just talking foolish, like you always do when you get mad."

She started to reply, then suddenly she stopped and listened, for some one was stepping onto the porch. When she spoke again, it seemed that she was sorry for her petulance, for her voice was almost caressing in its tone.

"All right, Bill, we'll let it go at that, and I'll be riding. But won't you return me that silk I dropped near your corral?"

Ready for peace at any price, he took the crimson silk from his pocket and held it out to her; but she put her hands behind her and smiled provokingly.

"Won't you untie it and then put it around my neck for me, Bill?" she begged. "Or must I ride away still thinking that you are afraid of a girl?"

She bent her head forward as he knotted the crimson silk behind her neck, and for a moment their faces were very close together. And in that moment a great pity took possession of Bill McCune; a pity for the girl who had never known a mother's care, but, left to her own devices, had grown up as wild and uncontrolled as the great black horse she loved.

"Can't we be friends, Jude?" he pleaded, and, placing a hand on each of her shoulders, he looked deep into her eyes.

Her dark eyes softened then, and so suddenly that he was taken unawares, she drew him to her and kissed him.

"There!" she whispered. "I love you, Bill McCune."

Startled, he almost shoved her from him and drew back in cold anger. Then, suddenly, he gasped, for Lorna Morrissey was standing by their sides with two mist-covered glasses of water.

"I'm sorry," she said, "if I interrupted you two, but dad was called to the telephone and asked me to bring you this water."

Lorna's voice was calm and unconcerned, but if ever Bill McCune disliked any one, he disliked Judith Storm then, for he knew that Lorna had seen the kiss, and that never would she understand.

Judith was wise enough to rattle on before the silence could become noticeable. There would be lots of time afterward for Lorna to ponder over what she had seen.

"A cup of clear, cold water," she said as she raised her glass high, "for which, Lorna, you shall be richly rewarded. I'll bet you can't imagine why I rode over to the Lazy Q so early in the morning."

"Is it something of mine you want to borrow, honey?" asked Lorna sweetly. "You know I've never yet refused you anything."

This was a new kind of warfare to McCune, and he found himself wishing himself elsewhere, for sweet though was Lorna's voice, he sensed that she was speaking at him.

"Not this time," laughed Judith gayly. "I want you and Pop and Ma Morrissey to come over to the X Bar Seven two weeks from to-day, for it is my birthday, and I'm going to give a dance."

A dance at Bull Storm's! Not in five years had such a thing happened.

Lorna wondered how Judith had ever gained her father's consent, for since McCune had been sent away, Bull Storm had set his face against all social gatherings in the gloomy old stone house beneath the hill.

"A dance," repeated Judith, and suddenly she grabbed Lorna around the waist and, humming a bar of the "Blue Danube" waltz, whirled the slender form the length of the porch and back.

"Young folks, young folks," admonished the voice of Ma Morrissey as, hearing the flying footsteps, she came out of the house. "My land sakes alive, who is going to be married now?"

Out of breath and laughing, the girls stopped and began to explain, and Ma Morrissey's eyes brightened with pleasure at the thought of what a dance would mean.

"Of course, we'll all come, Judith," she said, "and I'll bring along one of my spice cakes that you and Lorny and Bill used to like so well when you were all kids together."

Lightly Judith sprang into her saddle, and the chestnut began to dance away from the porch. Then, suddenly, she whirled him and bent over until her dark eyes were almost on a level with Bill McCune's.

"Will you come to my dance, Bill?" she asked. "Or did I make you mad?"

A slow smile dawned on his lean face as, level-eyed, he met her gaze.

"Bet your boots I'll come, Jude," promised McCune, "and I'll be riding Black Venom."

CHAPTER VII.

BULL STORM SHOWS HIS HAND.

CONCERNING the events which led up to the recapture of Black Venom, it is hardly necessary to go into detail. Sufficient it is to say that with the aid of the cowboys from the Lazy Q, the black outlaw and his band were rounded up and driven at last into a blind cañon, whence they had little chance of escape, and one evening, when the sun was setting beyond the blue Owyhees, Bill Mc-

Cune rode Black Venom back to the Little Ranch In Between. After unsaddling the outlaw, McCune turned him into the corral, and, leaning over the rail, watched him, as, subdued but untamed, with head held high and flashing eyes, he circled the inclosure.

"As fine a horse as ever I laid eyes on," declared Jack-pot, who was standing at McCune's side, "but a man-killer from the hoofs up. Some day he'll get you."

McCune shook his head as he watched Black Venom, who had ceased his circling at the sound of the little twister's voice and stood looking at the two riders leaning against the rails.

"No," said McCune at last, "I don't believe that Black Venom is naturally mean; bet you I have him gentled in time to ride him to Judith Storm's dance."

"So Jude has got you going at last," grinned the little rider. "I 'lowed she would."

McCune laughed, then he stretched forth a long arm and, removing Jack-pot's four-gallon hat, looked critically at his partner's flaming-red hair, before jamming the hat back over his ears.

"You poor little misguided insect," he jeered, "your brains are shrinking."

"D'you mean to tell me you ain't stuck on Jude Storm?" insisted Jack-pot, in no wise offended at his partner's horseplay.

"I don't mean to tell you anything," grinned McCune. "Just keep a-guessing. Seeing as Black Venom has been ridden pretty hard to-day, I'm going to saddle the bay after supper and take a pasear over to the Lazy Q."

As Jack-pot watched McCune ride away, a puzzled expression lingered on his homely, freckled face; then he took a photograph from his pocket and stood looking at it until the shadows of evening sauntered across the sage and made it too dark to see the pictured face of Lorna Morrissey.

"First I think I love Lorna," whispered Jack-pot to himself, "and then I think I love Jude, and sometimes I don't know tother from which, all the same as Bill McCune."

McCune's thoughts were in a turmoil as he rode toward the Lazy Q Ranch. Knowing that he loved Lorna Morrissey, he was almost of a mind to accept Pop's proposition regarding the consolidation of the Lazy Q with the Little Ranch In Between, thus strengthening his own position against Bull Storm, who, McCune felt sure, was desirous of obtaining the Little Ranch In Between for his own. Ostensibly, Bull Storm's desire for the property was due mainly to the fact that it contained the only living well in that region, yet in the back of his mind McCune felt that there was some other motive actuating Bull Storm; something which had to do with the killing of McCune's brother, Vane, five years previously. As to who had killed his brother, McCune knew nothing, in spite of Pop Morrissey's supposition to the contrary. But since his return to the Little Ranch In Between, McCune had become obsessed with the idea that the identity of his brother's slayer was known to one person at least; and that that person was Judith Storm. If he was correct in his supposition, how could he make her reveal the truth? There was one thing assured, which was that, so long as she believed him to be in love with Lorna Morrissey, Judith would remain silent, for with the intuition of a jealous woman, she must be well aware that while the cloud upon his name remained, McCune would not ask Lorna to become his wife.

McCune knew he could never love Judith Storm, yet, too, he thought his only hope of clearing his name lay in making her think he loved her. The very thought of practicing such duplicity revolted him, so contrary was it to his nature, leaving out of the question the fact that Bull Storm himself had always been

opposed to an alliance between the families.

Absorbed in his meditations, McCune failed to notice the approach of another rider until the deep voice of Bull Storm himself boomed through the evening silence.

"Studyin' over something, McCune, or jest ridin'?"

So unexpected was the voice that involuntarily McCune dropped his hand to his gun, but he removed it as he recognized the rider.

"Both," he said shortly, touching heel to his horse.

But the giant on the big black caught McCune's bridle rein with a huge hand.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"You can talk just as well without holding my horse," said McCune meaningly.

"There's no use going on the prod," rumbled the big cattleman, "an' being a man of few words, I can say 'em quick. I'll give you twenty-five thousand dollars cold cash for all your stock and the Little Ranch In Between."

McCune was startled, but by a great effort he controlled his features. Coming as it did on top of his own conclusions, the offer only caused him momentary surprise. If the Little Ranch In Between was worth that amount to Bull Storm, there must be some good reason for it; therefore McCune's voice was cold like ice as he enunciated the one word:

"Why?"

"'Cause I want it," came the instant reply. "Ain't that reason enough?"

"Not for me," said McCune; "you are not the only one who wants the Little Ranch In Between."

"Meanin'?"

"I want it myself, Storm," said McCune, slowly weighing his words, "for a home."

"Aimin' to marry Jude?" It seemed to McCune that there was a flicker of hope in the eyes of the giant as he leaned across his saddle.

"I'm not aiming to marry anybody," came the curt reply, "until I find out who killed my brother Vane."

"If you an' Jude was to marry," pursued Bull Storm, "you an' I would control the whole valley. An' I guess Jude is willin'."

"Seems like you've changed your mind mighty sudden, Storm," said McCune. "You have always been opposed to the McCunes. Anyway, what do you mean by saying that if I married Jude, you and I would control the whole valley?"

"Mean?" repeated Bull Storm as he spoke to his horse. "Why, I mean that I hold a mortgage for twenty thousand dollars on the Lazy Q Ranch."

Stunned by the sudden revelation, McCune hardly heard the taunting laugh of Bull Storm as the giant rode away. All McCune could think of just then was the duplicity of Pop Morrissey. No wonder Pop had wanted to consolidate the Lazy Q with the Little Ranch In Between. With McCune's comparative ignorance of business, it would have been easy enough to have duped him into losing his little ranch and all his stock. Yet, even as he raged, McCune found himself questioning the truth of Bull Storm's statement about holding a mortgage on the Lazy Q. The best thing to do was to ride straight to the ranch and ask an explanation from Pop Morrissey himself.

As McCune rode into the yard of the Lazy Q, he was met by the ranch foreman, Hasty Owens, who appeared just about to ride away. There was a worried expression on the face of the foreman.

"Howdy, McCune," he greeted. "The devil is to pay. Pop has been stricken down with one of his heart attacks and we had to phone for Doc Ewart. I'm on my way out to meet him with an extra saddle horse in case anything should go wrong with his car."

McCune whitened beneath his tan as he threw the reins over his horse's head and dropped to the ground.

"Bad?" he asked.

"Looks like the old man is going to join the last round-up," said Hasty Owens. "Bull Storm was here this evening and seems like it was something he said that laid ol' Pop on his back."

"You better be riding," said McCune. "I'll stay here till the doc comes."

McCune was met at the door by Lorna; her eyes were bright with unshed tears and her lips were all a-tremble as she led him into the big living room.

"It was Bull Storm did it, Bill," she whispered. "He threatened to foreclose on his mortgage if dad doesn't pay up in thirty days. Neither ma nor I knew that there was a mortgage on the Lazy Q. What will we do, Bill? What will we do?"

Hardly knowing what he was doing, McCune put his arm around the girl, whose surcharged feelings had now given way in a passion of tears; but she drew away from him and threw herself on the lounge, hiding her face in the cushions.

"Don't, Bill," she cried; "you mustn't. Bull Storm said you are going to marry Jude and take her to live on the Little Ranch In Between."

White anger filled McCune's face as he listened; but he sensed that it was no time for explanations; the main thing just then was to relieve the mind of Pop Morrissey if it was not already too late. Not for a moment did McCune hesitate; the girl he loved better than life was suffering; and it flashed across him that perhaps it lay within his power to save Pop Morrissey, or at least he could save the Lazy Q Ranch from the clutches of Bull Storm. In that instant McCune made up his mind to sacrifice all he had by accepting Bull Storm's cash offer for the Little Ranch In Between, and using the money to pay off the mortgage on Lorna's home.

In a few words he told Lorna that the money would be raised in time, although he did not say how he proposed to do it; then he followed her into the bedroom where the old cattleman lay gasping on the bed, with his wife sitting beside him.

Pop Morrissey was past understanding; but ma took McCune's hand and laid it in that of Pop, and it seemed to McCune as though the old man's fingers tightened.

Dawn was breaking over the Lazy Q when at last the watchers heard Doc Ewart's car draw up to the door. Lorna arose to admit the physician, and McCune withdrew.

"Quiet, rest, and no worry," was the verdict of Doc Ewart, "may do wonders; but another shock would kill him. I think I'd better stay with you a few days."

McCune was eating breakfast with Lorna when the telephone rang. Lorna answered it.

"Jack-pot Jones wants to talk to you," she said.

McCune's eyes were steady when he rejoined the girl. He said nothing of what he had heard over the phone. How could he tell her that his plan of raising the money to pay the mortgage had been shattered by Jack-pot Jones?

For the hoof-and-mouth disease had broken out among McCune's cattle on the Little Ranch In Between.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ANT HE COULDN'T CRUSH.

WHEN McCune arrived back at the Little Ranch In Between, Jack-pot was awaiting him. For a moment the hands of the partners met, then the little twister led the way into the house and threw himself into a chair.

"Well," he inquired as he rolled a cigarette, "what are we going to do about it?"

"Do?" repeated McCune dully.

"What can we do?" And in a few words he told of the promise he had made to Lorna that the money would be raised in time to pay off the mortgage Bull Storm held against the Lazy Q.

"So you think we are licked now that the epidemic has struck the stock?" asked Jack-pot. "Well, pardner, we ain't; not by a jugful."

Hope flickered like a lean flame in the tired eyes of McCune, but it died down as quickly as it had appeared, and he shook his head.

"You've got to show me," he said wearily. "Just as soon as we inform the authorities of the epidemic, a quarantine will be established, and inspectors will be sent down here to kill off all the infected stock lest the disease spread among the neighboring ranches."

"If the hoof-and-mouth disease were to hit the X Bar Seven," ruminated Jack-pot, "it would ruin Bull Storm."

"Probably," admitted McCune, "but that wouldn't save Pop Morrissey. And, besides, even if it would save Lorna's home from the clutches of Bull Storm, we couldn't drive infected stock onto his range. Guess I'll get Boise on the long distance."

The face of Jack-pot was a study as he listened to the one-sided conversation which ensued over the telephone. Finally it ceased and McCune threw himself into his chair again.

"Inspectors will be out as fast as a car can bring 'em," he said; "meanwhile we've got to take all preventive measures possible against the spreading of the epidemic."

The phone rang, and McCune arose again; when he came back there was the look of a beaten man on his lean face.

"Pop Morrissey has rallied since Lorna told him that the money would be raised to meet the mortgage," he informed Jack-pot, "and the devil of it is that I can't raise it, for nobody would be foolish enough to loan money on an infected ranch. I guess Pop Morrissey is due to lose the Lazy Q, and we are due to lose most of our stock, and I——" He broke off suddenly and dropped his face into his hands.

For a moment Jack-pot studied him, then slowly the little rider reached into his pocket and took out the photograph of Lorna Morrissey; quietly he pressed it to his lips; then just as quietly he stepped across the room and dropped the picture into the stove.

"Quit your bawlin', you blamed calf," he snapped at the bowed figure in the chair. "We ain't lost our sugar yet. Brace up!"

Taken up with his own troubles, McCune failed to get the connection until Jack-pot explained.

"Remember the ant Bull Storm tried to squash?" he asked. "Well, that li'l' insect got kinda crippled up all right, but with the help of his partner he managed to hang on to his sugar."

"Still I don't get you," said McCune. "This ain't no time for joking."

"I ain't joking, Bill," protested Jack-pot Jones. "I'm in dead earnest when I tell you that last night, while you was gallivanting around the country, I found out why Bull Storm wants the Little Ranch In Between."

McCune came to his feet then. Grasping Jack-pot Jones by the shoulder he swung the little rider around until he squirmed.

"What do you mean?" asked McCune. "Have you found out who killed my brother Vane?"

"I've got an idee," acknowledged Jack-pot, "but I ain't proved it, and maybe never will. Now hold your horses for a while and give a feller a chance to explain."

McCune's eyes gleamed as he listened, yet he knew that although there was now a chance of raising the money in time to pay off the mortgage on the Lazy Q, that chance was so remote as to seem hardly possible.

"It would take several thousand dol-

lars to do what you propose," he said, "and I have only a few hundreds."

"You ain't the only ant around here, Bill," chuckled Jack-pot. "I've got some sugar of my own."

"You, Jack-pot?"

From beneath his mattress the little twister took out a bank book. Opening it, he pointed out the balance to McCune.

"Thirty-seven hundred and nineteen dollars!" exclaimed McCune. "Where in tarnation did you get it?"

"Jest a-ridin'," replied Jack-pot. "Kind of a hope chest I called it. I thought that mebbe—some day—why, dog-gone it, Bill, ain't we both the same kind of ants?"

"Suppose the venture doesn't prove a success," said McCune presently. "You'll be flat broke."

"So will you," retorted Jack-pot; "so we'll still be the same kind of ants."

They were still talking when they heard outside the sounds of a horse's hoofs; a few moments later Bull Storm entered.

"Well," he rumbled, "I've got my check book with me; I suppose you are ready to sell by now?"

"May as well take yourself and your check book out of here," said Jack-pot Jones shortly. "The Little Ranch In Between isn't for sale."

"What the devil have you got to say about it?" asked the giant, bulking huge over the little twister.

"About fifty per cent," grinned Jack-pot. "You see, Storm, I own a half interest in the Little Ranch In Between."

"That right?" asked Bull Storm of McCune.

For a moment McCune wavered; then, as his gaze rested upon the bank book of Jack-pot, which still was lying on the table, he made up his mind to back his partner up for better or for worse.

"Forget it," said McCune. "The hoof-and-mouth disease has struck the stock on the Little Ranch In Between. No man in his sane senses would buy an infected ranch."

Bull Storm's eyes did not waver; instead he laughed shortly as he took out his check book and a fountain pen.

"What do I want with the stock?" he rumbled. "I'll give you twenty-five thousand dollars for the Little Ranch In Between."

The temptation was terrific in view of the mortgage the big cattleman held above the head of Pop Morrissey, and left to himself there is little doubt but that McCune would have accepted the offer for the sake of saving the home of the girl he loved. But to have done so, McCune would have had to break faith with Jack-pot, and after the way his partner had acted toward him, this he would not do. So there was decision in his voice as he made final answer.

"The Little Ranch In Between is not for sale."

As Bull Storm stumbled out of the house with an oath on his lips, from over in the corral came the snort of Black Venom.

"If I could be something I ain't," observed Jack-pot Jones with sudden viciousness, "I'd be a man-killin' horse."

"Forget it, Jack-pot," said McCune, "and come out and prove to me that you have good reasons for offering to back me up financially, or I won't take a cent of your savings."

"You just hold your horses until Bull Storm gets out of sight," warned the little twister. "I ain't aimin' to let him know why we won't sell just yet, for I wouldn't put it beyond Bull Storm to kill both of us if he knew that we know what he knows about the Little Ranch In Between."

"Do you think that my father knew about it?" asked McCune. "And if he did, why did he not take advantage of his knowledge and——"

"Old Thad McCune was a cattleman of the old type," asserted Jack-pot. "He

didn't want to have anything to do with anything but cattle; but before he died I think he told your brother, Vane, the truth about the Little Ranch In Between."

"You may be right," admitted McCune slowly. "Vane was the elder son. Dad always favored my brother until the day came when Vane announced that he was going to marry Judith Storm. Then dad r'ared right up and pawed the air. From that day until a week later when Vane was shot, dad and he never spoke to each other again."

"Just the same," persisted Jack-pot, "if Vane had not been killed, wouldn't he have fallen heir to the Little Ranch In Between?"

"I've heard dad say that he figured on leaving Vane the ranch," acknowledged McCune; "said he had other plans for me."

"Now if you were the possessor of a secret that might be worth millions," said Jack-pot, "who'd be the first person you'd tell it to?"

"Lorna Morrissey," replied McCune instantly. Then he colored up and tried to cover his confusion by rolling a cigarette.

"Shore you would," agreed Jack-pot, "but not so your brother Vane. The first person he would have told would have been Jude Storm."

"And Judith told her father," said McCune, wondering why he hadn't seen the whole thing before, "and my brother was killed by——"

But Jack-pot held up his hand. "Easy, pardner," he warned. "Don't say something you might be sorry for. We don't know who killed Vane, nor we don't know why, but maybe after a while we'll find out. I guess by this time Bull Storm is plumb out of sight. So I'm going to show you now what I found out about the Little Ranch In Between."

Doubt and hope were struggling for supremacy on the face of McCune as he followed Jack-pot across the yard and past the corral where Black Venom circled with head held high. The little twister stopped at the well.

"Listen," he said.

From below came a subdued roaring like the voice of a subterranean giant trying to break his bonds.

"It started last night while I was leanin' over the corral watchin' the black outlaw," said Jack-pot Jones. "Bein' kinda curious to see if the water was rising very fast, I lit a scrap of paper I had in my pocket and tossed it down the well, like this."

From his pocket he took a newspaper which he folded into a torch. Lighting it, the little rider warned the astonished McCune to stand back; then he tossed the flaming brand into the well.

A cry in which was blended a fear of something he could not understand broke from McCune's lips; then his face went white and he hurriedly stepped back from a blast of blue flame that shot into the air a hundred feet above the well, bearing with it the torch Jack-pot had used.

"What is it?" gasped McCune. "I've never seen anything like it before."

"Natural gas," replied Jack-pot. "That's why Bull Storm wants to buy the place. It probably means that there is a lake of oil beneath the Little Ranch In Between."

"But how do you know, man?" asked McCune, staring into the well, from which the blaze had died down as suddenly as it had burst forth. "What do you know about oil?"

"Who, me?" inquired Jack-pot. "Well, I was born in the shadow of a derrick in one of the biggest oil towns in Texas, and the smell of the darned stuff followed me plumb up here into Idaho."

But McCune was not listening; for, terrorized by the sudden burst of flame from the well, Black Venom had jumped the corral fence and, with snaky neck outstretched and ears laid back, was

charging straight at Bull Storm, who had seen the flame and had returned afoot to the Little Ranch In Between.

CHAPTER IX.

TWILIGHT AND EVENING STAR.

BOTH McCune and Jack-pot Jones had left their guns at the house, and the nearest rope hung on a saddle in the barn, a hundred yards away. The best the two riders could do was to rush toward the maddened horse, yelling and waving their arms in frantic effort to swerve him from his course.

But they might as well have yelled at one of the terrific electrical storms which sometimes in August sweeps down on the Owyhees. With the fury of an avalanche the black outlaw thundered down on Bull Storm from behind, his heart aflame with an insane desire to kill.

"Shoot, man," yelled McCune, as, warned at last of his peril, the giant cattleman stopped and faced the charging outlaw. "Use your gun."

Half dazed by the unexpectedness of the attack, for a second Bull Storm hesitated; then, when the man-killer was almost upon him, the cattleman's hand swept down and up, and the blue silence was shattered by a double roar from his Colt.

A scream came from Black Venom as a heavy slug tore through one ear, and, checking himself in his stride, he reared on his hind legs just in time to receive the second bullet in the center of his chest. Erect on his hind legs he hung for a split second, then down he came and backed by the huge black bulk of him his front hoofs crashed into the chest of Bull Storm.

The giant was still breathing when McCune and Jack-pot bore him into the house and laid him on a couch; then McCune stepped to the telephone.

"Guess I'd better call up Doc Ewart," he said. "He is still at the Lazy Q."

"Seems like," whispered Jack-pot, "it's up to me to saddle up and go break the news to Jude."

Under Doc Ewart's ministrations, Bull Storm rallied for a few days, but with his lungs perforated by his crushed chest bones, he had no chance to live, and he knew it.

"Seein' as I got to pass out," he whispered one evening when the sun was sinking behind the blue Owyhee, "you may as well bring a sheet of paper and a pencil and write down what I got to say. No, Jude don't need to leave the room, she's known from the first that I killed Vane McCune."

Bill McCune half rose from his seat, but he relaxed instantly, for one cannot wreak revenge on a dying man.

"It was on account of my li'l' girl," whispered Bull Storm after the doctor had wiped the crimson from his lips. "Vane, he wasn't acting honorable toward Jude—was trying to get her to elope with him—and—and she had no mother."

"That's what Vane and I fought over," confessed McCune, "but I couldn't save myself from prison at the expense of a girl's name."

Dark-faced and imperious, Judith Storm faced Bill McCune.

"Yes," she acknowledged, "I was the cause of it all. I thought I loved your brother, Vane."

"Forget it, Jude," said Bill McCune, "and forgive my brother, Vane, if you can. You had to stand by your dad, for you couldn't see him hung."

"First I thought I could get rid of you," whispered Bull Storm to McCune, "by buying you out. Then when you wouldn't sell, I thought I could close your mouth by having Jude marry you, for I could see in your eyes that you guessed who killed your brother."

"Then you didn't know about the oil on the Little Ranch In Between?" asked McCune in surprise.

Bull Storm tried to grin, but he was too weak.

"Oil," he whispered; "there is no oil; only a flow of natural gas; maybe enough to light up the house on the Little Ranch In Between." His voice faltered, ceased; then he spoke again. "Jude—li'l' girl—it's gettin' dark—shadows—shadows——"

Many things happened on the Little Ranch In Between during the weeks that followed the death of Bull Storm. Under the strict quarantine established by the State authorities, the hoof-and-mouth disease was kept from spreading to the neighboring ranches, and although McCune and Jones lost their stock, they were able to begin again on their joint bank account.

Later, when Judith Storm came into her estate, she extended the life of the Lazy Q mortgage until the price of cattle should have raised sufficiently to enable Pop Morrissey to meet his obligations.

As for McCune and Jones, they began to prosper in all they did, for by drilling they released a flow of artesian water sufficient to irrigate the Little Ranch In Between.

One evening, two years after the death of Bull Storm, Bill McCune and Jack-pot Jones rode up to the Little Ranch In Between; all day long they had been rounding up stock, and they had not eaten since morning.

"Better come in and eat with us," suggested McCune. "Since we piped the gas from the well into the house, and Lorna got to cooking on the new gas range I sent out from Boise, I'm gaining a pound a day. No tellin' where I'll stop."

"I'd like to, shore enough," murmured the little twister, "fur I'm hungry as a starved coyote; but somehow I figured I'd better keep a-ridin' till I reach home, for Jude, she don't like to be lef' alone when the shadders begin to fall."

WOMAN SUCCEEDS AS GAME WARDEN

WHILE such positions as forest ranger and game warden are usually given to men, owing to the arduous and sometimes dangerous nature of the duties, and the strength and endurance frequently required, there are a number of exceptional cases where women of proved ability have made good in this kind of work.

A notable instance of this is the case of Mrs. Florence Stukel, who demonstrated her fitness for her job of game warden, and clinched her hold on it by a daring capture of two illegal hunters. Being obliged to earn her living after her widowhood, Mrs. Stukel obtained a clerical position with the staff of the State game warden and succeeded in working her way to a field position.

The feat by which she demonstrated beyond the slightest doubt her ability to make good in the field occurred last winter. On a very cold day, Mrs. Stukel came upon the trail of two poachers. She tracked them from the scene of their unlawful "kill," deep in the woods, to their automobile which was parked on an isolated road. When the driver of the car refused to halt, the woman game warden fired her revolver at a rear tire, puncturing it. She captured the men, and her evidence was instrumental in securing their conviction.

Latterly, Mrs. Stukel has been working in the lake country of northern Minnesota, keeping close watch on those who use illegal methods such as nets and dynamite in fishing. Her headquarters is a one-room cabin, which she built herself. With her lives another woods enthusiast, Miss Marian Collins; and the pair are always accompanied on their trips by Mrs. Stukel's faithful dog.

The Man from Wyoming

By Joseph B. Ames

Author of "'Lone-hand' Larrigan," etc.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FLICKER OF A MATCH.

THE headquarters of the Cross Box outfit lay almost directly northeast of Del Monte and about twelve miles distant. Though comparatively near the town as the crow flies it was in a way remote, being hedged off by a series of rocky, wooded ridges which made a direct approach impossible. The usual and practically only means of access from the west was by a rough track which left the northern trail two miles beyond the fork, cut across the range in a wide sweep, and curved through a narrow valley lying between the Cross Box land and the much less extensive holdings of Swart Hagin.

This was the course Devlin and Larry O'Neill were forced to take unless they wanted to waste hours making a wide circuit around the wooded ridges to approach the ranch house from the east, and neither of them showed the least inclination to pick the longer and less hazardous route.

"If we're gonna make the Cross Box before sunup we can't go wastin' time like that," declared Devlin when they were well beyond the outskirts of the town. "Besides, if they've taken your friend to the ranch like the judge thinks, there ain't much chance of any o' the bunch ridin' back to town to-night."

O'Neill agreed with him. Buck found him a decent, likable sort of fellow, though silent and thoughtful as was natural, under the circumstances. Apparently undetected the two gained the fork and turned into the northern trail. Since O'Neill had already gone over the ground here they did not pause but rode briskly on through the darkness.

Though here and there trees shadowed the road, it was fairly open; and the brilliant starlight made it possible for them to see some distance ahead. Once before, on the night of his dramatic introduction to Del Monte, Devlin had traversed this same ground; but his condition had not been con-

ducive to any very definite observations. He knew he would recognize Hagin's shack where he had been drugged, and from which he had fled so precipitously; but the swiftly working poison had increasingly blurred his senses after that. When his companion halted about two miles from the fork, Buck looked around curiously with a feeling of entire unfamiliarity.

"Here's where we turn off," said O'Neill, unconsciously lowering his voice. "We better look the ground over, I expect, an' see if we can make out any signs."

Dismounting, Devlin took his small electric flash light from a saddle pocket, and together they carefully examined the intersection of the two trails. Hoof marks were plentiful enough, though somewhat blurred in the thick dust. Some were undoubtedly fresher than others, but it was difficult or impossible to make certain whether their quarry had turned off here or not.

"We'll have to take a chance," O'Neill decided at length. "If that Cross Box gang really have carried Dick off alive, the only logical place to take him would be the ranch house."

Buck agreed, and they resumed their way, talking little—and that in lowered tones—and keeping constantly alert for any signs of riders approaching from the opposite direction.

They had ridden steadily for upward of an hour when a faint, distant sound borne by the night breeze caused Devlin to drag abruptly on his reins. O'Neill followed his example, and for several minutes both men sat motionless listening intently.

"Somethin's on the move beyond there," O'Neill whispered at length in a slightly puzzled tone.

Devlin made no answer, but touching the roan lightly with one heel, sent the animal forward at a walk. O'Neill kept close beside him; and presently, the slow-moving horses making no sound in the dusty trail, they rounded a low spur thrusting out from the rocky ridge and halted again abruptly.

"Cattle!" breathed O'Neill in astonishment.

Devlin merely nodded without speaking. He was staring intently into the vague shadows ahead, a keen questioning in his eyes which presently changed to triumphant certainty. Suddenly he bent sidewise in the saddle.

"How close are we to Swart Hagin's land?" he whispered.

"Not more'n a couple of hundred yards," O'Neill answered. "You can see the fence yonder—right beyond that bunch o' spruce."

Shifting his glance Buck perceived vaguely the strands of wire which almost paralleled the trail. He also saw something else which made him reach out suddenly and grip his companion by one wrist. Beyond the clump of spruce and just about the other side of the boundary fence, a tiny flame flared up suddenly, flickered for a moment, and then went out. It was exactly the sort of flame, Devlin reflected, which would be made by a lighted match applied to the end of a cigarette. And then, as if in confirmation of his judgment, there came from that same direction the abrupt, impatient stamp of a horse. No stray, either, escaped from some remuda, for accompanying the stamp was the faint jingle of a bit.

Silently Buck turned and met O'Neill's puzzled, questioning glance. Then he bent toward Larry until his lips almost touched the other's ear.

"Rustling," he breathed. "I want to get up closer. Can we make that spruce, do you think?"

O'Neill hesitated, gauging the situation ahead. "It'll be a close thing," he whispered; "but I'm game. That roan o' yours likely to give us away?"

"Not him," affirmed Devlin. "He'll stand quiet."

"Mine too. Let's go."

Simultaneously they dismounted and, grasping the bridle reins close up to the bits, moved slowly and cautiously forward. Fortunately the mass of spruce lay between them and the section of open range where that little flame had glowed, for it presently became evident that not one rider was waiting, but several. As they drew nearer the problematical shelter, the intermittent murmur of voices came to them, accompanied by more jingling of bits, the creak of saddle leather, and a restless stamp or two.

There was no doubt whatever in Devlin's mind that by a most fortuitous chance they had stumbled on one of those transfers of cattle from Branigan to his henchman, which Buck had expected would soon occur, and which he had been planning with Judge Kendrick to investigate. Aware that the opportunity might not soon occur again and knowing that they were temporarily blocked from proceeding toward the Cross Box ranch house, he was determined at almost any risk to maneuver close enough to observe something definite of the transaction.

Reaching at length the margin of the trees, the two men led their horses in and fastened them securely to low branches. It was almost pitch dark under the thick canopy of heavy boughs; but Devlin's sense of direction was excellent, and by slowly and carefully feeling his way he managed to avoid dead crackling branches and gain the opposite side of the little grove with O'Neill close behind him.

Gently parting the fragrant pine boughs, he peered forth; and a sudden gleam of satisfaction flickered in his eyes. The group of horsemen were even closer than he had expected. Now and again he caught a word or sentence and easily recognized Swart Hagin's harsh voice and domineering tone. He noticed also that for a distance of a hundred yards or so the wire fence had been taken down, and then his attention shifted to the approaching herd, whose trampling grew louder and more distinct with every passing second. Under cover of this increasing noise he slipped back a step or two and, feeling for his companion, drew the latter closer and whispered in his ear:

"Find a place where you can see an' hear. Take notice of everything that goes on, an' all that's said, an' do your best to remember it. If you recognize any o' the men by voice or any other way, keep the name in mind. In other words keep your ears peeled an' your eyes skinned; believe me, boy, this is about the best chance we're likely to have to get the goods on this reptile, Morg Branigan."

CHAPTER XXX.

RUSTLERS.

FOLLOWING Buck's cue, O'Neill made a subdued sound of acquiescence; and the two hastily sought positions from which they could observe the gap in the fence and the open range on either side of it.

By this time the dull tramping of the oncoming cattle had increased to such an extent that Devlin was not surprised to see the vanguard of the herd top a gentle rise to the eastward and lumber toward them, vague, shapeless bulks in the semidarkness. At the same instant Hagin's domineering voice came to him clearly.

"Here they are at last. Spread out, fellahs; an' let 'em through. Slim, you an' Pete beat it over alongside them spruces an' keep any of 'em from runnin' off that way."

The two punchers designated turned their cayuses and loped toward the spruce, where they parted, one swerving to either side of the little grove. They passed so close to Devlin that he saw their faces clearly, recognizing one as the fellow with whom he had sat down

to supper that evening in Hagin's shack. The other he had never consciously set eyes on before, but the prominent nose and a curious triangular scar to one side of the fellow's chin made his face an easy one to remember.

The cattle came on briskly, driven by a number of expert punchers, and swerved through the gap in the fence and on across the range, where Hagin's men appeared to get into action. The din and clatter made it impossible to understand anything that was being said save an occasional shout which rose above the general noise. Devlin, all eyes and ears, was beginning to wonder impatiently whether their case was to be left in this unsatisfactorily incomplete condition, when all at once he saw two horsemen detach themselves from the throng and ride slowly toward the spruce grove.

"Can't even hear yourself think with that racket," grunted Swart Hagin, as they drew rein about a dozen feet away. "Where's Morg? Why didn't he come along?"

"Had somethin' else to occupy him," returned the other, a big, powerful, dark-browed fellow who looked as if he might have a touch of Mexican blood in him.

"Yeah?" queried Hagin tentatively.

"We got a li'le stranger over to the ranch house," explained the tall man, who from his looks Buck guessed must be one Flint Canutt, Branigan's foreman.

"I don't get you," retorted Hagin with some impatience.

"You wouldn't," drawled the other, taking out the makings. "It was a surprise to me when I come in from gatherin' up this herd an' found him there. It's Dick Rhone," he added, beginning to roll a cigarette.

"Rhone! For the love o' Pete!" Hagin paused, glanced toward the two near-by punchers, and then reined his horse closer to Canutt. "How'd Morg ever get that son of a gun to the Cross Box?" he asked in a low tone.

"Drug him there," rejoined Canutt, running his tongue lightly across the straw-colored paper. "Morg an' four, five others lay for him this evenin' at the fork west o' town, creased his horse, roped him, an' then toted him back to the outfit like a bag o' meal."

"But what for?" demanded the puzzled Hagin. "I can understand his wantin' the cuss out o' the way; Rhone's had it comin' some time. But what in the name o' blazes does he want with him alive?"

A match flickered into flame illuminating clearly for a moment the sleek, dark, sardonic face of the Cross Box man with his thin, cruel lips and evil eyes.

"You got me," Canutt said. "Morg ain't confidential to-night. I'd say, though, he was after information an' means to get it before he puts the kibosh on him for good. Let's get down to business." He handed a folded paper to Hagin. "Here's the total."

"How many this time?"

"Hundred an' twelve."

"Whew! That's near double the last bunch. You're three or four days early, too. At this rate the outfit'll be stripped bare inside o' three months. What's the big idea?"

"He hasn't told me that neither," drawled Canutt, pulling on his cigarette. "If you ask me, though, I'd say he was jest a mite worried over this guy from Cheyenne, who's been givin' us such a chase this week past. I wisht I knew the rights o' that business. You ain't heard nothin' new, I s'pose."

"Not a blame thing, only what this here Caskey's let out."

"That don't hook up Morg with him, though; there's somethin' more. Looks to me as if the fellah had somethin' on him, an' the ol' man was aimin' to grab all he could pronto in case o'—— Well, there'll come a bust up some day."

"Huh!" growled Hagin uneasily. "You heard anything to that effect?"

"No, an' I won't if I depend on Morg to tell me. He's a close-mouthed buzzard, all right; an' when the time comes to pull out he'll do it slick an' secret, leavin' me an' you an' the rest to hold the bag."

Hagin made no comment. He merely stared at Canutt, and between the two there passed a long, steady glance pregnant with understanding.

Watching them closely from his hiding place, Devlin missed nothing of this silent byplay, and abruptly there swept over him a feeling that if things suddenly went to smash over at the Cross Box he would just a little rather not be in Morg Branigan's shoes.

"He's got to be mighty clever to put anything over on these two foxes," he reflected. "Looks to me like they were just waitin' a good chance to double-cross the gent exactly like he done to me."

"He wants 'em passed right along to McTurk?" presently inquired Hagin in a casual tone.

"Sure," replied the dark man. "Drive 'em up there to-morrow an' get busy with the brandin'. He don't want no time lost."

Hagin laughed; it was not altogether a pleasant laugh. "He wouldn't," he commented. "Well, we'll do our best as per usual to satisfy him. You goin' back now?"

"I sure am. Been up since four an' workin' like a horse ever since. I'm aimin' to hit the hay pronto. So long."

Hagin replied briefly, and the two men rode away toward the remnants of the herd dribbling through the fence gap. Devlin, watching the tall figure on the red roan, saw him pause for a moment or so beside two other riders; and presently all three separated, apparently leaving Hagin's men and the remainder of the Cross Box punchers to complete the work.

Speculatively Devlin's gaze swept the valley that was fairly wide here but narrowing toward the east. Even in this moment of triumph at the incriminating revelations he had overheard, he was busy figuring a way by which he and O'Neill might leave this traplike refuge and carry out their attempt to rescue Dick Rhone. Devlin was still silently sizing up the situation when the two punchers who had been dispatched by Hagin left their positions on either side of the spruce and joined the others. Promptly Buck drew back into the impenetrable shadows of the trees.

"You heard?" he whispered.

"You bet I did!" returned O'Neil! with vicious emphasis. "I kind of guess I'm wise to what that lizard's up to. Godfrey! Why, he's been foolin' the whole kit an' boodle for goodness knows how long. That fellah with Hagin was Flint Canutt, Branigan's foreman," he added.

"I sort of thought so," returned Devlin. "Lookit. What about our slidin' outa here? If we don't go now we're likely to be held here an hour or so. Think we can sneak along the edge o' the brush while that crowd is busy drivin' the herd an' fixin' up the fence?"

O'Neill hesitated, peering through the parted branches. "We might," he rejoined. "We'd be sandwiched in between two bunches of 'em, though."

"Better that than comin' in tail end in the race," said Devlin, straightening. "Them three ahead ain't wastin' no time, believe me; an' the lot behind has got to nail the fence back. Let's take a chance."

Five minutes later two riders slid from the shelter of the spruce and drifted silently eastward along the valley, close to the margin of scrub oak, pine, and heavy undergrowth. Like ghosts they passed the active throng busy with wire and staples. They moved swiftly, soundlessly, with nothing visible in their passing save an oc-

casional dull glint from nickel plating or the vaguely tempered white of face and sun-browned hands.

If one of the workers had chanced to turn around the hue and cry would instantly have been raised. But they were all hustling to finish up and get away, and soon the two adventurers vanished beyond their sight. When presently the faint, distant drumming of hoofs was wafted back to them on the freshening night breeze, it meant nothing to their preoccupied minds save that some enviable cowman luckier than they was beating them to the rest and relaxation of the Cross Box bunk house.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE RESCUE.

THE stars had paled, and gray dawn was tempering the velvet blackness of the night, as Devlin and O'Neill, pushing through thickets of scrub oak, tamarack, and box elder, that filled the valley bottom, came suddenly to the end of the trail. They drew rein abruptly.

Ahead of them lay an open, gentle slope crowned by the dark, sprawling bulk of a single-story building, which O'Neill informed his companion in a whisper was the Cross Box ranch house.

"The bunk house an' corrals an' all are on the other side facin' the range," he added. "If it was a little lighter you could see the roofs from here."

"Thank goodness it isn't," commented Devlin, swinging out of his saddle, "or we'd be seen ourselves; an' trouble would start to pop. Let's get the cayuses under cover; we haven't got any time to spare, fellah."

The delay back there at the margin of Hagin's outfit, coupled with losing their way a little later, had upset their calculations entirely. Instead of having an hour or more of darkness in which to carry out their plan of rescue, the sheltering shadows had already begun to slide and ebb away like water seeping into sand; and the hazard of the enterprise increased with every fleeting moment. That hazard had become, indeed, so great that Devlin, for all his dash and daring, would have been strongly tempted to put off the business until the following night had such a delay been possible. Unfortunately it wasn't. This chance, slender as it was, might never come again—certainly not in time to be of any material use to Rhone, of whose ultimate fate Buck was only too certain.

Hastily tethering the horses among the trees a little off the trail, the two men emerged and made straight for the ranch house. There was no time for cautious circling. Speed and dash were all that would avail them now; and to these Devlin trusted, feeling a slightly added sense of reassurance in the belief that the hard night's work which had just been put through was scarcely conducive to early rising. Their greatest danger would be the untimely appearance of the crowd they had left behind.

As they hurried up the gentle slope, Buck studied the log and adobe building closely. Three windows pierced the wall facing them. Two were dark, but in the third a faint flickering light at once stirred his interest and curiosity. Slowing down a little, he drew O'Neill's attention to it with a gesture.

"It's a kind of storeroom back of Branigan's office, I think," Larry whispered after thoughtfully regarding the window for a moment.

Devlin frowned. A storeroom with a light in it did not strike him as propitious. It looked very much as if some one was up and about; and, as he moved forward rather more slowly, he loosened his six-gun in its holster.

About twenty feet from the building he motioned his companion; and the two separated, approaching the window from either side. Creeping up cautiously,

Buck discovered that the lower sash was raised. He halted, the puzzled lines deepening in his forehead. For a moment or two he stood there listening intently; but no sounds of movement came from within the room, and the dim light remained stationary. Finally, gaining the rough wall, he stopped again; and, as he bent slowly toward the window, there came suddenly from within a distinct though gentle snore.

Still puzzled, though with more confidence, Buck slid noiselessly along the wall toward the faintly yellow square and, peering around the casing, stiffened suddenly like a hound upon the trail, an eager, speculative light leaping into his eyes.

The room was about twelve feet square, filled chiefly with an untidy clutter of broken furniture, old saddlery, boxes, kegs, and a thousand and one odds and ends scattered about the floor or placed with some show of order on rough wooden shelves. A little to one side of the window with his back toward it, a man slumped down in a rickety old chair, legs sprawling, carroty head sagging to one side. His right hand rested limply on the butt of his holstered Colt. From his open mouth there issued with reassuring regularity the snores which had attracted Buck's attention.

The sight of him, however, was not what had brought that sudden light into Devlin's eyes. Stretched out on the floor, within a few feet of the guard's sprawling legs, lay the helpless body of another man who was very much awake. A guttering candle on a box—aided by the coming dawn which seemed to rush upon them with fatal swiftness—betrayed with sufficient clarity the cords fastened tightly about his wrists and ankles, shone upon his black rumpled hair and strained face, revealed, even, the look of startled surprise followed by a sudden, desperate hope leaping into the dark eyes that stared at Devlin.

The latter hastily put a finger to his lips and beckoned curtly to O'Neill. There was no time for detailed planning or finesse. Even seconds were growing precious, for at any moment the bunch of Cross Box punchers they had left behind might come upon the scene and ruin all. The sleeping guard must be throttled and made helpless, silently if possible, but at any rate without a moment of delay.

Into O'Neill's attentive ear Buck breathed a few words, received an understanding nod, and turned again to the window. Grasping the sill with both hands, he drew himself noiselessly into the opening and swung his body lightly across the sill. His feet had scarcely touched the floor when the gentle snoring ended abruptly in a guttural snort, the sprawling figure of the guard straightened in a flash; and the man started to leap up.

He was not more than half way out of the chair when Devlin's six-gun struck him smartly on the head; and, with a gasp that ended in a groan, the Cross Box man sagged back and would have toppled from the rickety chair save for Buck's grip upon his shoulders.

"Cut him loose, quick!" breathed Devlin as O'Neill joined him. "Save the rope."

Straightening out the unconscious puncher, Buck loosened the fellow's neckerchief and deftly made it into a gag, keenly attentive the while for any sounds indicating that the household had been aroused. O'Neill worked briskly on the captive, slicing with his knife, flinging each length of cord over to Devlin as he cut it.

Three minutes later the redhead, trussed up and securely gagged, had taken the place of Rhone, while the latter, stiff and cramped of limb, was being helped through the window by O'Neill.

Buck paused to blow out the guttering candle, and, as the yellow light died in a spiral of gray smoke, he realized

with a little tingle how completely the shadows had fled before the gold and crimson streamers that streaked the eastern sky.

"Get down to the horses as quick as you can," he told the other two as he joined them outside the building. His voice was crisp but cool and untroubled. "Rhone can take mine; I'll rustle something here. Don't wait for me. That bunch is liable to show up any minute, an' if they do you'll be trapped in the valley."

"Look here!" protested O'Neill. "I ain't gonna——"

"You do what I say an' do it pronto," cut in Devlin sharply. "Take to the woods when you hear 'em comin'; an', after they've passed this way, you head straight for town. Get to the judge the first thing, Larry, an' tell him everything you heard last night—don't forget that."

"But you——"

"Never mind about me; I'll be all right. I'm goin' the other way across that ridge into the old Circle Y basin. So long."

Without waiting for a reply, Devlin turned and ran toward the far corner of the ranch house, ducking agilely as he passed the windows. Realizing the hopelessness of any further protest, keenly alive to the necessity for haste, O'Neill caught Rhone by one arm and urged him down the slope. They had scarcely covered half the distance to the edge of the trees when from the wooded valley bottom along which their trail curved and twisted, there came the faint, distant thudding of approaching horses.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DARING.

MEANWHILE, Devlin had turned the corner of the ranch house and halted briefly to get his bearings. The building stood on the summit of a slight rise, the ground dropping gently away from it on three sides. To the east and north the open range stretched illimitably. On the west the woods covering the lower reaches of the rocky ridge that hedged the outfit approached the clearing rather closely. It was scarcely fifty yards, indeed, between the fringe of trees and the rear of a couple of small sheds flanked by a large corral, which lay about a hundred feet from the front of the ranch house.

The bunk house was not visible from where Buck stood; but, as his glance swept away from the corral to the sheds and thence along the margin of the woods, it lighted on a narrow opening in the trees which bore every evidence of being the beginning of a trail—a trail, he suspected from certain details he had heard, which must circle the lower reaches of the ridge to emerge in the open level Circle Y basin beyond.

There were no signs of any of the men about, but Devlin could scarcely believe that everybody could be still slumbering in spite of the night labor in which most of the punchers had evidently had a part. Indeed, a thin column of smoke rising from a chimney at the opposite end of the ranch house told him that the cook at least was up and engaged in the preliminaries for breakfast. Once more he gauged the distance to the corral with its groups of horses. To reach it he would have to cross a hundred feet of open in full view of the ranch-house windows.

Under normal conditions this would have been utterly impossible. Even with conditions in his favor, as they certainly were on this particular morning, the undertaking bristled with hazards; and Buck figured that he had about one chance in ten of reaching the corral unobserved, securing a horse, and making good his escape.

The only other alternative, besides hampering Rhone and O'Neill with his presence, would have been to take to the woods and make his way back to

Del Monte on foot. Considering how little he knew of the country, and the swift pursuit which would inevitably follow the discovery of Rhone's escape, Devlin felt that this would be about as hazardous as the other—and infinitely slower at a time when speed was precious. And so, counting on the unpreparedness of his enemies, trusting somewhat to luck and a little to his own swiftness and ability, Buck wasted no time in indecision but left the shelter of the ranch house and boldly struck out across the open for the nearest shed.

He moved slowly, almost indolently, hat slightly tilted to conceal his face from any one chancing to glance out of the ranch-house windows. When that dull thud of hoofs came from the rear he did not increase his speed a particle, though his muscles grew a little tense. Glancing neither to the right nor left he lounged along, finally gaining the shelter of the shed without arousing any outcry. Racing along behind this and the adjoining blacksmith shop, he whirled around the corner and made straight for the corral gate, moderating his speed when he came in sight of the bunk house, which faced the far side of the inclosure about fifty feet away.

His eyes sparkled at the sight of a number of saddles and bridles slung carelessly along the top rail, and from one of them Devlin coolly detached a rope and shook it out. He was perfectly aware that at any instant some one might appear and start hell popping; but, with the same unhurried manner, he entered the corral, expertly caught up a bright bay, and led the animal forth.

As he slipped on the bridle his nerves were tingling, but his hand was admirably steady. Reaching for the nearest saddle he shot a stealthy glance toward the bunk house, to find some slight reassurance in the somnolent atmosphere which hung about it. It is safe to say that no saddle was ever flung on and adjusted with such expert swiftness yet with such an apparent lack of haste. A person glancing casually from one of the distant ranch-house windows would have regarded the movements of this solitary puncher with an entire lack of suspicion. It was the occupants of the bunk house whom Devlin feared. That building was so close that a single glance from door or window would be sufficient to betray him.

But, as the silent seconds ticked away and nothing happened to disturb the placid morning stillness, Buck began to believe that luck was with him. And then, just as he had yanked the cinch tight and buckled it, he heard the sudden screech of rusty hinges followed almost instantly by a profane exclamation of anger and surprise.

Like a flash he grasped the saddle horn and thrusting his left foot into the stirrup, sent the spirited bay flying toward the woods back of the blacksmith shop. Clinging there against the side of the horse he saw, above the bright, flowing mane, a man ducking back into the bunk house from which issued instantly a confused bedlam of sound. Before he could reach the shelter of the sheds, that first puncher was back again in the doorway emptying his six-gun hastily at the escaping rustler.

His haste was all that saved Devlin, or at least the bay; for Buck was protected from the bullets by the body of the horse. One of these hummed past a foot or two above his head; two more went wild; and then, as he flashed back of the blacksmith shop, the splintering of wood told him that he was temporarily out of range. Without slackening speed Devlin swung himself into the saddle, slightly turned the bay, and raced toward that opening he had noticed in the margin of the woods.

From the direction of the corral came a confused uproar of shouting, mingled with the thud of running feet. Devlin

was also aware that the bunch of homecoming punchers had left the valley and were racketing up the slope. But these had not yet come in sight, and from the others he was sheltered by the providential bulk of the two sheds until he had almost reached the margin of the woods. Flinging himself low over the bay's neck, he spurred the animal; and, like a flash of blurred color, the horse cleared those final ten feet, vanishing into the green fastness amidst a hail of bullets.

Miraculously not one of them grazed horse or rider. The Cross Box men were surprised and perhaps a little flurried. Possibly they had expected him to head for the easier trail down into the valley. At any rate Buck's closest call came after he was well under cover, when a rifle bullet pinged past his face so close that he could fairly feel the whirring of it.

"Close!" he breathed, and then a momentary grin twitched his lips. "You're some baby," he addressed the horse, bending forward to slap the bay's neck approvingly. "I'll bet you don't belong to any reg'lar cowman; you're a heap too good for that. Wonder if you could be one o' Branigan's cayuses?"

The possibility was singularly intriguing. To penetrate to the very center of his enemy's stronghold, release a prized prisoner, and depart astride Branigan's favorite mount, appealed strongly to Devlin's sense of humor. But not for an instant did he relax his vigilance or grow assured. Only too well he knew that the situation was still most hazardous. He only guessed that the faint trail led into the open basin beyond the ridge. Actually it might swerve suddenly in an altogether different direction; it might conceivably end abruptly in some cul-de-sac where he would be caught like a rat in a trap.

All this was possible, and yet to leave that twisting track which tortuously threaded the rough, wooded country would be fatal. Hidden in the forest he might escape for a little the persistent pursuit of the Cross Box gang which had only just begun; but this would be merely giving them time to gather their forces together, systematize the search, and slowly but surely run him down.

"The only way is to keep one jump ahead an' beat 'em back to town before they have a chance to organize," he reflected.

So he rode on rapidly, twisting and turning with the trail, pausing briefly at intervals to catch the first faint echoes of hoofbeats back of him. These were a long time coming. The bay was fresh and mettlesome and kept up that long, swinging stride with no evidence of fatigue. Most of the other Cross Box horses must be pretty well worn out from the extra labor of the past twenty-four hours.

Some of them, however, were evidently fresh, for at last Buck became aware of the sounds of pursuit he had been expecting. These were still faint and distant, however; and already the trees were thinning about him, letting in more and more light and sunshine. Finally he swept out into the open and slowed up abruptly.

He saw at a glance that it was not the Circle Y basin which lay before him but a long, narrow valley hemmed in apparently on every side by low, wooded hills. A creek meandered placidly along the fertile bottom flanked by cottonwoods and the lighter feathery green of drooping willows.

The outlook was entirely unfamiliar; and, for a second or two, Buck was smitten by the beastly feeling that he was in a trap. Then abruptly he realized that there had not been nearly time for him to reach the Circle Y basin. There must be two ridges instead of one between it and the Cross Box headquarters with this fertile sun-drenched valley lying in between.

Hastily his appraising glance swept the southern line of hills, and he at once decided that he could not possibly make them before his pursuers came in sight. The only refuge remaining was the tree-lined creek, and without delay he spurred the bay diagonally toward it.

Reaching the bank he pushed through the trailing willows and rode into the stream. Instead of crossing at once he urged the horse forward through the water, which was shallow with a tolerably firm bottom. He knew the creek must lead him to some easy exit from the valley; probably it curved around through a break in the southern hills at present invisible. If his pursuers tried to track him he felt no doubt of his ability to outdistance them. Even if they guessed where he was heading and sped forward to cut him off, Buck still had his six-gun to fall back upon; though he would have felt rather more assured with the rifle he had left tucked beneath the skirts of his own saddle.

Taken all in all, however, he was not greatly worried even when, through a scant rift in the green barrier which screened him, he saw several riders burst into the open behind, halt, and stare about the valley. He was conscious of a curious sense of exhilaration; there was something stimulating in thus pitting his wits against that bunch. Even when, a little later, the approaching thud of hoofs told him that some at least of the men were heading directly for the upper end of the valley, Devlin's lips merely straightened a little; and a sudden dancing light flashed into his eyes.

As the riders came on steadily Buck managed to gain the shelter of a gnarled old willow whose drooping branches formed an almost impenetrable screen. Halting, he slid out of the saddle and standing by the bay's head, kept the animal quiet by soothing touches.

Presently the Cross Box men came abreast of his hiding place and galloped on. A moment or so later Devlin heard the sudden swishing of branches and a splash as one of them rode across the creek and up the other bank. A sharp bend in the stream just ahead hid the fellow from his view, but Buck guessed that their object was to search for traces of him on the other side.

As soon as the pattering drum of hoofs began to lessen, the fugitive mounted and rode swiftly on, still keeping to the water. In about twenty minutes he heard them returning and repeated his maneuver. This time, however, his shelter was not so complete; the shafts of sunlight filtering through the willows were distinctly broken by the dark bulk of four riders passing slowly. Almost Buck thought they meant to halt, and his hand slid down to the holster against his thigh. But whatever the cause the slowing down was only momentary.

"He didn't have time to get this far," one of the men said positively. "He must have gone the other way."

Some one answered but the reply was indistinct. Buck gave a slow grin. What a dumb lot they were! Evidently Branigan was not with them. He wondered why—wondered suddenly with a little tingle of anxiety what could have taken the Cross Box manager elsewhere, and whether anything could have happened to O'Neill and Rhone.

The possibility troubled him, blinding him a little to the difficulties of his own situation. For a space he rode on mechanically, until at length the creek swerved sharply to the left; and the shadows of cliffs suddenly blotted out the sunlight. He kept to the water for another hundred yards, and then ventured to leave his shelter to find himself in a narrow cañon dividing two lines of hills. He could see nothing of the valley nor any signs at all of the men who so lately had been so keen upon his trail. A thoughtful furrow lined his forehead as he followed the

course of the stream which led him finally into the placid, golden stillness of the Circle Y basin. There was something about that peaceful isolation which Buck found curiously disconcerting. Why had Branigan's henchmen so readily abandoned the pursuit? Of course they might actually believe that he had gone in the opposite direction and still be searching for him there, but somehow Devlin wondered. Were they quite so stupid as he had imagined, or was there some other reason?

Abruptly turning to the right he rode westward, keeping prudently within the fringe of trees. Constantly his glance swept the rolling range land in search of any alien or suspicious presence, but nothing human moved in that whole wide basin. A hawk circled warily overhead; now and again the careful-stepping bay routed out a jack rabbit. But as far as men or horses were concerned Devlin might have been riding through a remote wilderness.

Somehow he found something unnatural in this sudden let down. Knowing how passionately Branigan longed to "get" him, this apparent cessation of pursuit instead of lulling him into a sense of security had precisely the opposite effect.

At length, however, by a deliberate effort of will he dismissed the problem temporarily from his mind and turning deeper into the forest sought out a remote and placid glade where he unsaddled the bay and secured him to the trunk of a mountain ash by the full length of the rope to give the horse ample grazing.

He himself was fairly reeling with fatigue. For more than a week he had been living on his nerve, sleeping scantily and irregularly and working both brain and muscle to the very limit. To meet the crisis which was impending he must be rested, fresh, alert. He simply had to get a little sleep; and, since he did not purpose trying to enter Del Monte until after dark, he welcomed this opportunity.

But when he had pillowed his head on the saddle and luxuriously stretched his weary limbs, his thoughts swept suddenly and alertly back to the problem which had so lately risen. Why had that pursuit been so suddenly abandoned? What was Branigan up to? Just how and when and where, he wondered, was the blow going to fall?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SUSPENSE.

STUNG to a fresh burst of speed by the thud of those approaching hoofs, O'Neill and Rhone gained the cover of the woods and pushed on hastily to where the two horses were tethered.

There was no chance there for comment or explanation. The Cross Box riders came steadily along the near-by trail, presently clattered past where the two men were hidden, and emerged into the open—leaving the fugitives listening intently to the receding pound of hoofs. Presently Rhone turned and regarded his companion.

"That was this Devlin fellah," he said in a bewildered tone. "What in thunder is he doin' here?"

"I met him at Judge Kendrick's house where I went after I found you'd been carried off," explained O'Neill. "The two were talkin' together; an', when the judge asked him to help me out, he came like a shot. That's all I know about him; but, believe me, he's one dandy fellah."

"He sure must be," agreed Rhone, though his expression was still puzzled. "There ain't many would do that for a stranger, besides leavin' his cayuse for me an' stayin' behind this way. I don't like that part of it at all, runnin' off an' leavin' him to——"

He broke off abruptly as a sudden fusillade of shots came clearly from the direction of the ranch buildings.

O'Neill's fist clenched spasmodically, and the muscles about Rhone's mouth and chin tightened.

"Thunder!" he muttered. "They're after him already. Lookit, old-timer; we can't stay here an' let——"

A second volley, drawn out and prolonged, crashed through the still air. Impulsively Rhone turned the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle. But before he could spur the roan, O'Neill reached out and caught his bridle.

"Wait!" he protested. "You can't do that. Listen!"

Following swiftly on that final echoing shot, the distant irregular pound of hoofs came to them.

"You don't s'pose I like it, standin' here like a stick in the mud, do you?" inquired O'Neill shortly. "But what good would we do tryin' to buck that whole Cross Box crowd? We'd be drilled in two shakes an' wouldn't be helpin' Devlin a scrap. It sounds to me like he'd got away an' was beatin' it with the whole bunch after him. Lemme tell you, if he's got hold of a decent cayuse I'm backin' that boy to make his get-away clean."

Rhone scowled but made no effort to start. For a space the two stood motionless listening to the faint racketing of hoofs which died away in the distance. Then O'Neill mounted.

"Come on," he said shortly. "We ain't out of the woods yet ourselves, an' it's jest come to me that somethin' besides savin' our own skins makes me want to get back to town whole."

"What do you mean?"

Briefly O'Neill told him of what they had overheard while hidden in the spruce grove, and Rhone was swift to grasp the significance and importance of the revelation.

"I ain't surprised," he commented as they headed toward the trail. "I been suspectin' there was dirty work goin' on but never got any proof. So that's why Branigan's so dead set on gettin' hold o' this Devlin. He knows, o' course, what the fellah's up to, an' he's fair turnin' handsprings to put the kibosh on him. Look at to-night."

"You mean his ropin' you?"

Rhone's expression was angry and chagrined. "Yeah. How'd you know that?"

"I didn't. It was Devlin who guessed it."

They had merged into the trail and were following it away from the Cross Box at full speed.

"He guessed right," snorted Rhone. "Branigan's had it in for me some while as you know. I wouldn't have been surprised any time to have 'em bushwhack me; but, when I come to after that knock on the head an' found myself tied up in the Cross Box storeroom with that reptile sittin' alongside me, I sure thought I'd gone loco. Even when he begun to pump me about Devlin an' where he was hidin', things didn't clear up much."

"What give him the notion you knew?" asked O'Neill.

"Goodness knows! Might have been on account o' my takin' the fellah's part that first night in the Broken Dollar. I can't think of anythin' else. But he had it, all right; an' you know yourself that once an idea gets into that buzzard's nut it takes a charge o' dynamite to blow it out."

"Yeah," nodded O'Neill. "He's sure a mule for stubbornness. Can't move him for love nor money."

"You said it! When I told him I didn't know, which naturally I'd have said anyhow, he wouldn't believe me. He gabbed, an' threatened, an' finally give me till mornin' to come across or take the consequences. If you fellahs hadn't shown up when you did! Well, there ain't much in the way o' thumbscrews an' that sort of thing that reptile wouldn't have tried. Thunder, Larry! I sure feel like a cur beatin' it this way."

"Same here, but it's gotta be done. Let's speed up a mite."

Swinging along the trail they presently left the woods and turned westward along the border of Swart Hagin's outfit. Riding warily with six-guns loosened in their holsters, they kept a sharp lookout in every direction but met no one and toward noon dismounted in front of Judge Kendrick's house.

The judge, just sitting down to dinner, welcomed them eagerly and during the meal listened to their story with close attention.

"Looks as if he were heading for the Circle Y basin with the idea of working back to town that way," he said at its conclusion. "If that young man has a decent horse and any sort of a start, I'll back him to put it over even Branigan's bunch of cutthroats."

He was delighted when O'Neill told him of their witnessing that secret transfer of cattle and directly after dinner took down a detailed statement which Larry signed. Rhone had meanwhile removed their horses to the judge's barn, and it was decided that the two men had better remain quietly within the house during the afternoon.

"He'll come straight here as soon as he can make it," declared the judge positively. "Like enough he won't venture into town till after dark, but we don't want to take any chances of missing him."

So the three men settled down presently in the front room with a deck of cards to occupy them. From the windows there was an excellent view of the main street; and, as the afternoon wore away, interest in the game grew more and more perfunctory until at length it was abandoned altogether in favor of the more vital occupation of keeping track of what went on outside.

Toward six the first of the Cross Box crew began to drift in. An hour later they were very much in evidence, lounging about the vicinity of the Broken Dollar or passing in and out of the wide, swinging doors. To the three watchers who had hurriedly swallowed a hasty supper, an atmosphere of slowly growing suspense became manifest. The gang outside had certainly not gathered by chance but from a deliberate purpose. What that purpose was seemed only too evident. And, as dusk began to fall, Rhone's smoking grew practically continuous; O'Neill, scowling through one window, showed increasing signs of nervousness; while the judge got up every now and then to restlessly pace the floor.

"They're waiting for him," he declared at length. "Evidently he's given them the slip out on the range, and they're planning to catch him here."

He walked over to the desk, took up his revolver, and dropped it into a hip pocket, returning without comment to his chair drawn near the second window. When dusk had deepened into night he made no move to light the lamp but sat motionless, staring intently into the street from under his shaggy brows.

At length a sudden sense of activity over by the saloon brought him abruptly to his feet. Face drawn and tense, he peered through the glass and heard a sharp cry of warning across the street.

"Sounds bad," he said curtly. "Anyhow, I can't stand this any longer. I'm going out."

Reaching for his broad-brimmed black Stetson, he clamped it on his head and strode into the hall, O'Neill and Rhone close at his heels.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE TRAP.

IT was dusk when Devlin opened his eyes and for a moment or two lay motionless blinking up at the gray, ghostly trunks of ash and oak mingled with the black, bulking pines that hedged the little clearing. He felt ex-

traordinarily rested and revivified, ready to tackle anything. Doubts and uncertainties had vanished; and, springing up, he was conscious of a keen desire to fling himself back into the struggle from which he seemed to have been so suddenly and inexplicably eliminated.

Hurriedly saddling the bay, he coiled his rope, buckled it to the saddle, mounted, and made his way swiftly back to the basin. As he left the shelter of the trees he faced the high, bald peak of Thunder Mountain, its summit faintly bathed with the reflected glow of the dying sun. The sky had paled, and here and there a star began to twinkle faintly. Down in the lowlands the purple shadows were creeping forward like slowly widening pools of ink.

Buck drew a full breath and, turning the bay westward, touched him lightly with a spur. At length a dark bulk of tamarack loomed ahead; and, circling this, he came presently to the edge of the main trail. His objective was Judge Kendrick's house, and the most direct way thither was by this trail which presently merged into the main street of Del Monte.

Devlin was not afraid to take it. It wasn't caution which tightened his hand upon the reins. At the moment he felt perfectly equal to threatening or shooting his way through the bunch of Cross Box men who by this time he was convinced were centered in the town to catch him. But in that case the very openness of the thing might defeat his purpose, compromise the judge, and end in failure. It would be much more effective to achieve his object secretly and hatch his plans before any of the enemy knew of his presence. As he considered the location of the judge's house, he could think of no better way than to slip through the tamaracks to the rear of the Broken Dollar stable and, leaving his horse in this black security, slide through the alley flanking the saloon on foot.

He managed the first part of this program admirably. Tethering the bay among the trees behind the barn, he circled that building noiselessly and gained the corner facing the saloon with silent ease. But here he was forced to halt. The saloon was a blaze of light; and, from the open windows of the long addition, came the ceaseless rise and fall of many voices. A glow from the brightly lit interior illumined to no small extent the rear premises, and to Buck's sensitive ears came a sense of stir and movement which could not be entirely accounted for by a corral full of restless horses.

He crouched at the corner of the barn, an eager, reckless light in his eyes. They were waiting for him here, then, instead of watching the trails into Del Monte. Evidently Branigan's stubborn soul still held to the belief that Buck and Nance Austin were in collusion—that if Buck returned to town at all it would be to see the girl.

Devlin's narrowed gaze raked the alleyway, perceiving now and then a figure passing across the farther end. Was there a guard there also, he wondered. It seemed likely. Again his keen eyes swept the rear premises of the Broken Dollar, and this time he was certain that there were men as well as horses there. It was a trap, of course; but that very realization sharpened his wits and set a dancing devil flickering in his eyes. He might have retreated, but he would not. If he could slip past the bunch lurking about the corral and gain the other end of the alley unperceived, the briefest dash, backed by his six-gun and the advantage of surprise, would take him to the shelter of Judge Kendrick's house across the street.

Leaving the shelter of the barn he crept across to the other side of the alley, sliding noiselessly through the darkness like some gray phantom. Face hidden by his tilted hat, he slipped past

the shed back of Bowker's store and stealthily crossed over to the darker bulk of the Broken Dollar—the windows in this much older section being blank and empty of any signs of life.

Flattened against the old log structure, one hand sweeping lightly across the rough surfaces, he passed two windows, a door, two other windows; and then a sudden shrill outcry from the street told him how unexpectedly keen had been the watch maintained for him. To dash out now into that crowd ready and waiting to get a shot at him would be suicidal. Instinctively he retreated, jerking out his Colt; but the outcry in the street roused a sudden stir in those back premises he had just left, and abruptly Devlin halted beside the door.

He was hemmed in—trapped! A thousand swift regrets swept through his mind as he stepped into the deep recess backed by that heavy oaken portal. Some of these were ridiculously trifling—others more poignant. For a brief instant the vivid memory of a girl's face flashed before him, and he wished ardently there had been a chance to see her in the flesh once more. Unconsciously his hand closed over the door latch, and instinctively he pressed it; but it remained as unyielding as a rock.

As he twirled the cylinder of his revolver a grim, chill smile twitched Devlin's lips. At least if he had to go under he was determined that he would not go alone. But though there was some slight comfort in this reflection, the realization that Branigan himself—the man he had set out to get and who, instead, had apparently got him—would escape unscathed, was like acid to his soul.

Peering from his precarious refuge Buck saw that figures, indistinct but threatening, were creeping slowly toward him from the street. A group of vague, gray shapes had just rounded the rear corner of the building. It was time to start things, Devlin concluded; and slowly he raised his weapon.

As he did so a miracle occurred. Back of him there came a faint click; and abruptly the heavy door swung inward; a hand was thrust out, caught him by one wrist, and hastily drew him—bewildered and unresisting—into a narrow hallway.

Halting in the darkness, Devlin heard a well-oiled bolt shot home. A faint, illusive perfume assailed him; he was conscious of a soft rustle and the sound of rapid breathing. Then a hand groped toward him, and suddenly soft fingers touched his arms.

"Quick!" breathed Nance Austin in an agitated whisper. "You must come away from here. They'll know where you've gone and break down the door."

Devlin dropped his six-gun into the holster, and his fingers closed about the girl's small hand with a firm yet gentle pressure.

"How did you know?" he asked quietly.

"Know? That you were there, you mean? Why, I saw you. I was in Neil's room watching by that window on the alley. I saw you slip past, and then run back."

"But what—— How did you come to be watching? I thought you were in the bar. And you couldn't possibly have known that I was comin' into town this way."

"I guessed that you were coming some way. The town is full of Cross Box men. They've been about the streets and in the barroom since long before dark. I knew they were up to some beastliness. You could tell it. Then I overheard two of them talking, and suddenly I realized what it was. I realized that they were hunting you, and yet I could do nothing!"

"There isn't anybody could have done more," Devlin told her fervently.

"But this was just luck. When some of them began to gather in the street by

the alley, and I saw others sneaking out to the back, I knew they must be setting a trap. You came that way before once, you know—through the tamaracks back of the stable. How they found it out I can't think, but——"

"They didn't," said Devlin briefly. "They only guessed—or rather it was Branigan's stubbornness. He's still hugging that old idea, you know; and so he believed that when I did come back I'd head straight here to see you."

"Oh!"

The girl's tone was a trifle blank with a vague, illusive questioning in it which Devlin promptly answered.

"I should have, of course, but not with a pack like this after me. I've no business to be here now. They're sure to guess how I got away; and if they once break in here!"

He paused abruptly as the latch rattled impatiently, and a heavy body was flung against the stout planking. With a gasp of fear Nance caught his hand again and tugged at it.

"Oh, do come away!" she begged, terror stricken. "You must hide before they break in. There's a place in the cellar I'm sure they'll never find."

Without comment Devlin followed her through the narrow passage to the main hall, dimly illumined by a single bracket lamp. As he looked down into her frightened, pleading eyes a queer thrill went through him; and almost he gave way. Then another thud against the door brought a look of chill defiance into his face.

"Listen," he said gently. "What would you think of me if I ran away and hid?"

She stared. "Think! You can't imagine it would make me think less well of you? You see I know that crowd; they'll stop at nothing. I don't care what you do if only you manage to get safe away. The cellar stairs are back there. Won't you please come?"

Slowly he shook his head. "I can't," he told her briefly. "I'm through with hiding and all this hole-in-the-corner business. I'm going outside, and——"

"But you can't!" she almost wailed. "They're all about the house; a lot of them are in the bar ready to move quickly. Branigan's there, and he——"

She choked over the last words, and abruptly a curious change came over Devlin. His whole expression had grown suddenly amazing alert; his features seemed oddly sharpened; and, in the pupils of his eyes, there glinted a pale, chill flame.

"Branigan is in the bar?" he repeated softly.

She nodded. "At least he was there a little while ago when I came away."

Devlin's tall figure stiffened, and his glance swept toward the door leading from the hallway into the space behind that broad inclosure of polished mahogany which flanked one end of the saloon. Suddenly the girl caught at him with both hands, her face anguished, her gray eyes swimming with tears.

"Oh!" she cried unsteadily. "You mustn't go! I—I love you! I couldn't go on living without you. I'm not ashamed. I love you. Do you hear? I love you! Don't you care—at all?"

Devlin turned swiftly back to her, and one arm swept about the slender, black-clad figure, so small and slim that she seemed almost like a helpless child. Drawing her close, he looked down into her stricken face with eyes in which that ruthless, chill determination had vanished before a wave of tenderness.

"I care for you more than anything else in all the world," he told her gently. "I ain't worthy to touch your little finger; but for all that I'm darin' to love you, an' I'll go on doin' it to my dyin' day. But this reptile, Branigan—— I can't let him go, girl. You think now it wouldn't make a difference if I cut an' run, but I know better. There'd come a day."

"No! Oh, no! Never!" she wailed, clutching at him desperately.

Her arms crept about his neck and drew his face slowly down to hers. For a space her soft cheek wet with tears was pressed against his own; he could feel her heart fluttering madly like some stricken, struggling bird. But when at length she lifted her head and looked into his face with a tense mingling of hope and fear, she saw there no relenting; and her heart seemed to die within her.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AUDACITY.

THE door connecting the private apartments of the Gurnee family with the bar was specially constructed and as soundproof as such things can be made. It was heavy, too, and solid save for a small glazed section about eight by ten inches set some five and a half feet from the floor and covered by a shirred piece of white net, the work of Mrs. Gurnee's ready but not altogether skillful hands. The purpose of this veiled opening, of course, was to provide a convenient peep hole through which one might observe what was going on in the saloon, without arousing the attention of that motley throng which frequently crowded the long room.

Buck Devlin approached it eagerly, oblivious alike to the presence of the girl and those violent thuds which crashed rhythmically against the door at the end of the narrow passage behind him. Before they could smash through the heavy oaken planks, he would be either triumphant or dead.

Thrusting aside a tiny corner of the fabric, his glance swept swiftly and inquiringly around the crowded, smoke-filled room. There were men he knew, others he had never seen before; some he merely judged by their attitude or expression. There was about the throng an atmosphere of restlessness, of tension, of expectation, even; but Buck decided that the attention of the majority was not especially attracted toward the bar. His gaze returned to the bulky figure of Morg Branigan, who leaned against the bar—his back toward it and both elbows resting on the polished surface.

For a second or two Devlin studied his enemy, an expression on his face like that of a wild beast about to spring. Then he turned swiftly to the girl who stood close beside him.

"Listen," he whispered hurriedly. "It's all right. I ain't takin' any chances at all, hardly."

A second later he jerked the door open, flung himself across the narrow space in a single amazing leap, and reached over the bar—the barrel of his six-gun prodding Branigan's fleshy back.

"Stick 'em up, Morg," he advised. In the sudden, surprised hush which fell upon the crowd his voice penetrated to the farthest corner. "Anybody wishful to shove this gent into eternity will do it by draggin' on his trigger."

A low murmur arose, but for a moment no one moved. Then suddenly, over by the door, a tall man sprang up—drawing a squeal of terror from the Cross Box manager.

"No shootin', Slim!" he yelled. "Put that gun away, I tell you. He's got me."

"You're right he has!" muttered Devlin in his victim's ear.

Buck slightly shifted his position, moving his body a little to one side, and bracing his feet, but continuing to prod his captive with the barrel of his Colt. Then suddenly his left arm shot out, partly circling Branigan's body. Exerting all his strength, he heaved the big man from his feet and dragged him, kicking and protesting furiously, across the broad surface of polished mahogany.

It was done so suddenly and unex-

pectedly and the two were for the moment so inextricably mixed up that no one apparently dared to risk a shot. Shoving the big man against the bar, Devlin plucked Branigan's six-gun from its holster and thrust it in his own waistband. Not for an instant did he relinquish the saving magic of the drop.

"Atta boy!" breathed the excited voice of Jim Wallace, one of the white-jacketed bartenders who stood near by. "You got him cold, kid."

Devlin's eyelid fluttered, but he made no answer. His chill eyes continued to hold the restless mob in a steady, enigmatic stare.

"Now we'll get down to business," he said crisply, emphasizing the remark by a little prod of his Colt barrel. "There's a bunch around in the alley tryin' to bash in Gurnee's door, Morg. Send somebody around to stop 'em."

Branigan hesitated but not for long. Clever as he was, cold, callous, and bold to plan the crimes and depredations carried out by his subordinates, he had never been noted for physical courage. He boiled with fury at his humiliating plight, but at no moment could he escape the quivering consciousness of that deadly metal tube thrust snugly against his back.

"You go, Slim," he ordered. "Whoever it is, tell 'em to leave off."

As the tall man by the door slipped out, Devlin shot a momentary, sidelong glance at the white-aproned figure beside him.

"Go get the judge," he breathed out of the corner of his mouth. "Bring him in here the back way."

Without comment Wallace moved slowly back, gained the door in the rear wall, and vanished. Again Buck's glance briefly swept the crowd. Outwardly composed, a little sardonic glitter in his level eyes, he was only too well aware that success or failure still hung by the most tenuous of threads. A breath, almost, would send the balance against him. So far he had succeeded by sheer daring and audacity. The crowd held off because they had no leader, but at any moment that growing restlessness which was only too apparent might burst out in a consuming flame.

As a matter of fact not many of Branigan's special henchmen were present. Canutt and Hagin and possibly McTurk were probably with the party who had tried to trap him. But the bulk of the crowd, either from fear or because of petty perquisites, sided with the Cross Box manager; and from their expressions they were evidently still under his sinister, compelling influence. Caskey also was present, though not obtrusively; there was also another small group—a tall, bearded giant and four rough-looking companions—whom Buck was quite unable to place. For a second or two he warily watched them slowly edging closer to the bar. Then he became aware of fat, pompous Lafe Tweedy, the town marshal, pushing his way forward.

"Come now! Come now!" the latter protested, regarding Devlin with an uncertain eye. "You can't come in here raisin' the devil an' upsettin' the town like this."

"N-o?" drawled Devlin. "But you see I've—done it."

Tweedy's jaw sagged a trifle. "But it's a barefaced holdup," he said querulously. "You're threatenin' the life of a respectable citizen, an'——"

"Respectable!" Buck gave a short laugh. "You ain't got me quite straight, marshal," he went on smoothly. "You see, this here respectable citizen o' yours has been huntin' me with men an' guns for a week past. To-night he got me in a tight corner, I'll admit; an' I just naturally had to do somethin' radical to pull out. I ain't meanin' to hurt a hair of his head providin' him an' his men behave. O' course somebody might easy drill me where I stand, but

my gun's one o' these hair-trigger sort, an' you see what would happen to him then."

"But why shouldn't he be huntin' for you?" grunted the marshal. "You're wanted for rustlin', ain't you, an' murder besides?"

Again Devlin laughed, that short, brittle, sardonic laugh. "Meanin', I suppose, that roan I got off McTurk," he remarked. "I kinda thought he wasn't on the level. You see," he explained pleasantly, "I paid him forty cold dollars for that horse; an' I've got his receipt for it in writin'."

A little quiver went through Branigan, followed by an inarticulate sound as if he were on the point of speech but suddenly changed his mind. For a moment the marshal seemed at a loss.

"I dunno nothin' about that," he said at length, evasively. "The warrant's still out an' has to be executed. Anything you got to say in your defense will be reviewed in court. I wonder," he added with heavy sarcasm, "will you be so ready to admit downin' Ben Krebs?"

"Why not?" returned Devlin blandly. "It was a pretty neat shot if I do say it myself, an' the cur certainly wanted killin' badly."

The official's gasp at this effrontery was taken up and prolonged throughout the room. An angry murmur rose from the crowd, turning swiftly into a menacing growl. Devlin stiffened, and the unconscious forward thrust of his Colt drew a suppressed protest from Branigan. The bearded giant and his husky companions were by this time within a few feet of the bar. Swart Hagin had just slipped in from outside, followed by the swarthy Canutt and others.

"Hell's gonna pop in about two shakes," Buck reflected dispassionately. "Well, anyhow, no matter what happens, I'll take Branigan along with me."

At that instant he heard the door behind him gently close. Kendrick, of course. He wished now he hadn't sent for the judge, who stood an excellent chance of going down in the general mêlée. What was his horror when, instead of the expected tall, gaunt figure, Nance Austin moved swiftly forward and stood beside him!

"Go back, girl!" he gasped. "For goodness sake, go back!"

She did not look at him. Her face, strained, determined, seemed deliberately averted as if her hard-won courage would vanish if she met his eye.

"No!" she said in a low tone.

Her slim, shapely hands rested on the bar; her delicate, flowerlike face, tense and deathly white, looked straight at that restless, angry, grumbling throng.

"Please!" she said suddenly in her low, clear voice. "I have something to say."

Men stared, perplexed, wondering, some of them impatient. Abruptly the burly, bearded giant turned and faced the crowd.

"Quiet down, can't you?" he shouted. "Leave the lady speak."

To Buck's amazement he saw the girl's face light up in a sudden, surprised smile as she perceived the big man. "Oh!" she said quickly. "My—friend. I never saw you there."

The man grinned and moved closer. "Looks like you might need me tonight, lady," he said in a lowered tone.

Her face sobered. "I hope not," she answered briefly. "But——" She bit her lips, and then her head went up as again she faced the crowd. "That beast was choking me," she said with an evident effort. "He followed me when I rode over to my old home, the Circle Y. He—he dragged me about by the hair, and caught me by the throat with both his hands and—and then Devlin came and shot him. There isn't one of you here who wouldn't have done the same, not one!"

"I hope there isn't," came from be-

hind Devlin in Judge Kendrick's crisp, dry voice.

Buck had been so engrossed as to be oblivious to the entrance of the judge, accompanied by O'Neill and Dick Rhone. Viewing them out of the corner of his eye, observing that Gurnee and the two bartenders had weapons ready to their hands beneath the counter, aware of the mysterious yet friendly interest of that burly giant and his equally stalwart companions, Devlin gave a little sigh of relaxing tension.

"The brute deserved what he got," continued the judge dispassionately. "If ever this man is brought to trial no jury on earth, not even in Del Monte, would convict him."

It was not until afterward Devlin recalled that at this moment he was almost subconsciously aware of the clattering approach of the incoming stage. The danger was far from over, and his mind was divided between his prisoner and an ardent longing to get the girl back into safety. She stood close by him, but before he could voice another urgent appeal Swart Hagin's harsh snarl came from the end of the room.

"That listens good, but what I wanta know is how this fellah with a deputy from Cheyenne after him can come in here an' raise ructions an' try to run the whole shebang. You're allus talkin' about law an' order, judge; how about it?"

"Yeah," suddenly burst out Branigan venomously. "You're the judge, an' there's the marshal an' Sheriff Stroud in the room; but I don't find one o' you liftin' a finger to make this fellah lay offn me. How long am I gonna stand here with a six-gun poked into my ribs an'—an'——"

His voice died away in a queer rattling gurgle. His shoulders sagged; his eyes, wide, incredulous, horrified, were riveted on the outer door. Following the direction of that stare, Devlin's own expression grew suddenly keen, alert, questioning, and a wave of bright color surged into his face.

A man had just entered and was moving with leisurely composure toward the bar. About fifty-five he looked, spruce, well-preserved, groomed to a degree of perfection that made him seem almost like a person from another world. His manner was assured, with an underlying touch of unconscious dominance which drew curious glances from the crowd and caused them to draw back instinctively to let him pass.

As he approached the bar, conditions there seemed to arouse in him no emotion save a reserved, well-bred curiosity. He did not even glance toward Branigan, whose staring eyes followed him with horrified fascination. His glance swept the near-by faces casually, coming to rest upon Judge Kendrick's weathered, hawklike visage.

"I trust that I am not intruding," he said. "I'm looking for Mr. Buck Devlin. My name is Blount—Ripley Blount."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RIPLEY BLOUNT.

IN the pause that followed—a pause pregnant with tension and suspense—one could almost have heard a pin drop in the big room. Blount! The absentee owner of the Cross Box whose identity had become almost a myth to most of the inhabitants of Del Monte! It was a name to conjure with.

What chance drew Devlin's glance past this interesting stranger to a little group of Cross Box men beside the door he never knew. But, as it rested on the dark, saturnine face of Flint Canutt, a sudden, premonitory tingle swept over him. Suddenly his sharp eye caught the glint of metal in the foreman's hand, and instinctively he ducked.

As he did so the crash of a pistol reverberated through the room. Without a sound Morg Branigan suddenly

grew limp, his heavy body sagging inertly against Devlin's shoulder. For an instant Buck was smitten by the fear that unconsciously his finger had pressed the trigger of his own weapon; but, as he eased the heavy body to the floor, the bullet hole drilled neatly through Branigan's forehead bore mute evidence of the treacherous foreman's deliberate intent.

In a flash Buck recalled the brief conversation he had overheard two nights before between Canutt and Hagin, and understood. The game was up. Canutt knew where Branigan's loot was hidden and had deliberately shot him to keep it for himself.

"Get after 'em!" shouted Devlin, as he discovered that not only the murderer but several other Cross Box men had vanished. "They'll be beatin' it along the north trail."

There was something of a bustle at the rear of the room, but actual signs of pursuit were at best perfunctory and half hearted. Nobody appeared very eager to risk the fire of these notorious gunmen; and, by the time Buck could reach the door, the pattering drum of receding hoofs told him that he was too late.

It was chiefly the thought of Nance which drew him swiftly back to find that Gurnee had already taken her away. Judge Kendrick, emerging from the bar, engaged in conversation with Mr. Blount, who seemed calmly oblivious to the violence which had just raged about him. As Buck came up he turned toward him with a pleasant smile.

"You're Devlin, I think," he said frankly.

"You've got me right," returned Buck as he took the outstretched hand. "I reckon the judge told you."

"No," denied the older man. "I guessed it." His fine eyes twinkled a little. "You seem, somehow, to my mind the sort of man who wrote that letter."

Buck grinned. "You mean I had my nerve with me?"

"Not at all. You used your head. By the way, do you think it would be possible for us to find some place where we can talk quietly?"

"Why, sure. I reckon Cale won't mind it if we go into the parlor. How about it, Cale? Mr. Blount wants to use your parlor for a bit."

"Go to it," urged Gurnee. "The house is yours. You know the way, Devlin. Reckon I'll have to stay here. Excitement always does start a thirst. An' ma's away visitin' her sister. My gosh! She'll sure be fit to be tied when she comes back to-morrow an' finds out what she's missed."

As Gurnee lifted the bar flap, Mr. Blount turned toward the judge to find him holding forth to Sheriff Stroud.

"If you want to hold your job," he was saying curtly, "you'd better get after that gang an' run 'em down or out of the country. They're crooks, every last one of them, as will very shortly be proved to your satisfaction. As for these charges against Devlin, they're absurd and will be quashed at once."

"But how about me?" spoke up Jed Caskey, who was standing near by. "I brought a warrant for this fellah from Cheyenne, an' now I've got my hands on him I ain't gonna stand no chance of his makin' a monkey of me."

The judge regarded him with ill-concealed impatience. "He has no idea of running away," he retorted shortly. "I'll answer for him, and to-morrow morning in court I'll give your claims every reasonable attention."

A quiet chuckle came from Mr. Blount. "Can you spare us a few minutes, judge?" he asked. "I'd like to have your opinion on certain matters. Your interpretation of the law," he added, as they passed through the bar into the hall beyond, "is admirable."

Judge Kendrick gave him a sharp glance, and then his features relaxed.

"A certain latitude and broadness is necessary at times," he said with a brief smile. "At the moment I feel so grateful to our friend there for ridding this county of a curse that I'm likely to cut red tape recklessly in his behalf."

"I gather there isn't anything very serious against him."

"Nothing of moment. I'm not probing into his past. It may have been hectic, but I'll guarantee he's straight now. You see," he added, lowering his voice, "there's a girl."

"Ah! That pretty young thing I saw behind the bar when I came in. Her father hustled her away just after the shooting."

"The same—and she's as sweet as she is pretty; but Gurnee isn't her father. He died about three months ago. His name was Austin, and he owned the Circle Y outfit you bought lately and added to your holdings. When she was forced to leave her old home it almost broke her heart, but she pulled herself together pluckily and fairly forced Gurnee to give her this job."

"You mean that she works as a barmaid here?" asked Blount. "I should think that would be rather distasteful to a young girl of her evident refinement. Don't the men——"

"No, sir. They're a rough crowd, some of them; but Nance has never had any trouble that I know of. Indeed, she seems to exert a curious influence over the boys—an influence for good, I mean."

"It's her fineness and fresh innocence, I suspect," murmured Blount.

As they joined Devlin in the parlor Blount's aristocratic, finely chiseled face had grown a little sober. Asking them to be seated he took his place beside the walnut, marble-topped center table which was one of Mrs. Gurnee's chief treasures.

"I begin to fear," he said, looking at Devlin, "that your letter has not exaggerated conditions here. I'll go over to the ranch to-morrow, of course, and make a thorough investigation."

"I'm afraid you'll find things in a bad way," said Devlin. "I don't know how much stock that fellah's got away with, but from something I overheard it wouldn't have taken him more than a couple o' months longer to completely loot the outfit."

"I dare say," shrugged the older man. "But that isn't of much consequence compared to the harm this Branigan seems to have done hereabouts by corruption and terrorizing. I take this much more to heart, for, of course, I am to blame for it all."

He paused. Taking out his cigar case he passed it to the others. "I suspect," he went on leaning back in his chair, "that I have been severely blamed for gross neglect. The truth is I've never regarded this property as a special source of income. It was my brother's hobby; and, when he died leaving it to me, I kept it out of sentiment. I know nothing about ranching and, frankly, care little. Other affairs have always fully occupied my time and attention. A clerk in my offices receives and files the manager's reports; I've never even seen them. When the old manager died some years back I was notified, of course. At the time market conditions made it impossible for me to leave Chicago, but by what I then considered a lucky chance an application for the position had only just arrived from this Branigan, accompanied by a letter of recommendation from a man I knew and trusted in Butte. I suspect now that this letter was a forgery."

"Do you mind tellin' me his name?" asked Devlin.

"Not at all. It was Henry Wells, vice president of the Wells Kipper Mining Company. Can you throw any light on the business?"

"Not much; only I happen to know that Branigan had a job with that company about the time you speak of. I

suppose he might have found out some way that you an' this Wells were friends, an' like enough it would be easy to get hold of his signature an' some letterheads. He was pretty slick at imitatin' folks writin'."

"I dare say that accounts for it. He seems to have been a clever scoundrel generally. I sent for him and had a short interview. I didn't altogether fancy his personality; but he seemed to know the cattle business thoroughly, and there was Wells' letter. Well, I think that's all for to-night. I merely wanted to explain the situation to you both. To-morrow we'll ride out to the ranch and make a practical investigation if you can spare the time."

Devlin grinned. "I got all the time there is now," he shrugged. "Matter o' fact with this business over I expect it'll be hangin' heavy on my hands 'till I rustle me a job." Suddenly his expression changed, and he turned abruptly on the judge. "Ain't there some way you could stir up the sheriff to get that Flint Canutt?" he asked. "I got a hunch he knows where Branigan cached his loot an' means to get away with it. If he does, Mr. Blount stands to lose considerable."

"Never mind that," said the older man as he stood up. "I'd a little rather the fellow did get away, if you must know. I owe him something for eliminating Branigan from the situation. If he had been brought to trial I'd have lost a great deal more time than I can well afford. I suppose I can get a bed here?"

"Sure," said Devlin. "I'll go get Gurnee."

He departed, returning presently with the proprietor; and with a cordial good night, Blount left them. Buck was to spend the night with his legal friend; and, not having slept in a regular bed for so long, he ought reasonably to have been quite ready for one. Yet somehow he did not feel sleepy; and, now that the interview with Mr. Blount was over, his thoughts flashed back to Nance, to her amazing courage, her fineness, the sheer wonder that such a girl could care. Rather wistfully he wished he might have seen her again, if only for a moment.

"We'd best go out through the kitchen," remarked the judge, turning down the hall. "The front door's hardly ever used, and if we go through the bar we'll never get away."

Buck followed him toward the rear premises; but, as he came opposite the narrow little side passage, a soft whisper halted him like a shot and sent a keen thrill tingling through his big frame. Whirling about his eyes lighted swiftly at the sight of the slim, girlish figure standing in the shadows.

"You ought to be in bed," he chided gently, as his arms went about her, though all the while he was thankful she was not.

She looked up at him, her eyes starry, lips a little tremulous. "I couldn't sleep," she answered in a faintly husky voice. "I wanted to tell you that I was wrong. Your way was the only one. I must have seemed such a poor, weak creature to try to stop you."

Devlin's head bent swiftly, and he crushed her to him with a sort of tender fierceness. "Girl! Girl!" he muttered hoarsely. "Don't ever say that again. It's gonna take me a lifetime o' hard work to catch up to you—if I ever do."

"What in the world's the matter, Devlin?" the judge called from the kitchen. "Aren't you coming?"

For a moment Buck did not answer; he could not. When he finally joined Judge Kendrick in the lighted kitchen, the older man regarded him with curiosity and some surprise.

"What's happened to you?" he asked. "You look as if you'd taken on a new lease of life."

Devlin's lips curved in a curious little smile. "I have," he answered simply.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE END OF THE TRAIL.

IT was nearly three o'clock the following afternoon when the little group of riders finally left the Cross Box ranch house and headed down the gentle slope toward the trail leading back to town. Investigations had revealed that conditions there were much as Devlin and the judge suspected, though only a thorough round-up of stock would reveal the complete extent of Branigan's peculations.

In the late manager's own bedroom were signs of a hurried search that pointed to Flint Canutt; but, as the entire outfit, including the cook, had decamped, nothing definite could be ascertained as to the success or failure of his villainy.

Blount had brought out a number of men from town to remain on the outfit until a permanent organization could be built up, with Dick Rhone temporarily in charge. The latter had his own growing outfit to consider but was willing to help out for a time, even though his recent experiences had rather prejudiced him against the Cross Box.

Rhone rode with them now down the gentle, sunlit slope receiving a few final instructions from Judge Kendrick, who had calmly postponed court to accompany the party. Blount had appointed the latter as his local agent with full power to act for the absentee owner; and, when they finally parted with Rhone, he gave a faint sigh of satisfaction.

"I call that a very recent day's work," he said to Kendrick. "Now I'll be able to take the morning stage and be back in Chicago on Thursday."

"There's still a manager to appoint," the judge reminded him.

"I know," nodded Blount. He hesitated briefly, then drew rein and turning in his saddle met the glance of Buck Devlin, who with Nance brought up the rear. "How much do you know about ranching, Devlin?" he asked abruptly.

"Not an awful lot," admitted Devlin. "O' course I've punched cows off an' on, an' I was straw boss for a season up in Wyoming."

"How would you like to run the Cross Box?" inquired Blount in a matter-of-fact tone.

Buck stared. "Run it? Be manager, you mean. Great guns! I'd like it almost to death." He paused; and, though his white teeth showed in a smile, keen regret and disappointment lurked behind the whimsical twinkle in his eyes. "I couldn't take it, though. It would be a crime. I ain't up to the job."

"He could learn," spoke up the judge suddenly. "As foreman under a good manager I believe in a couple of years he'd be well fitted to take the job."

"Foreman?" repeated Mr. Blount dubiously. "That doesn't sound to me like much of a job. I wanted——"

He paused as he perceived Devlin's sudden eagerness; and his glance swept to the girl's flushed, radiant face.

"You both look," he remarked whimsically, "as if it would suit."

"Suit!" exclaimed Buck. "You bet your life it would! I reckon you don't know that foreman's jobs on an outfit like this are about as scarce as hens' teeth."

"That's settled, then," said Blount, loosening his reins. "I'll talk over the details with the judge."

"He's a dear, isn't he?" murmured Nance when they had started on again.

"You bet!" ejaculated Devlin fervently. "He's pure gold. Foreman o' the Cross Box! An' prospects! Golly! I never knew a man like him before."

For a space they rode on in silence, each busy with their own thoughts but sweetly conscious of the other's presence. Through the canopy of green, the sunlight sifted down in dancing golden splotches; the leaves rustled

softly in a vagrant, caressing breeze. Back in the woods a mocking bird burst into sudden song, its rich, true, tender notes making a melody so poignantly sweet that Nance fairly caught her breath. When the brief song ended she sighed gently, and then turned to the man beside her.

"Darling," she murmured. "Do you think that—that we could live in the old house?"

Devlin glanced down at her lovely face and suddenly reaching out caught her hand in his. "It might be managed," he returned. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I'd love it," she told him in her soft, sweet voice. "It's home, you know."

At a bend in the trail Ripley Blount glanced over his shoulder at the two riders so close together and so very far behind.

"We'd better not wait for them," commented the judge dryly. "They'll get back their own way. Luckily there's plenty of time."

The other man sighed gently. "Time!" he murmured, a touch of wistfulness in his fine eyes. "They don't know the meaning of the word, man. And why should they? They have all time, eternity, and—each other."

He sighed again, faintly; and, touching the horse with his heel, he rode on slowly in silence beside the wondering judge.

THE END.

A GIRL OF THE OREGON WOODS

A REAL outdoor girl of the woods is Margaret French, who makes her home in the southern part of Tillamook County, Oregon. She spends most of her time out in the open near her home on the Salmon River. She is an expert with rod and gun. She sets her traps in the woods during the winter and generally gets her deer in the fall hunting season. Miss French is only sixteen, and she is fond of boyish styles both as regards dress and hair cut. As she rambles through the woods in her soft-collar shirt, khaki knickers, woolen socks, and oxfords, she is a very boyish young lady.

There are times when the nerve of this young huntress is put to severe test. One of these occasions occurred a few weeks ago, when a famished cougar sprang out on her and her father as they were walking along a forest trail. The cougar was upon them in a flash, taking them unawares. Margaret, more agile than her father, leaped back in time to avoid the animal's first rush; but her father was unable to get out of the way. He could not discharge his rifle but could only try to use it as a club to beat off the infuriated beast.

The girl, however, was equal to the occasion. In a second, she raised her own rifle, took aim, and pressed the trigger. She was just in time to save her father from severe laceration and possibly fatal injury. The cougar fell lifeless from the impact of the bullet. On examination, the animal proved to be eight feet in length. After seeing that her father was all right, the girl took the cougar's pelt to Tillamook and collected the bounty of twenty-five dollars on it, so that, after all, it was not such a bad morning's work.

Honey for Silvertip

By Austin Hall

Author of "Trust a Mule for That," etc.

THERE'S nothing so sweet as a day in June, and sometimes there is nothing quite so hot. That is, unless one stops to consider John Harper Adams on the particular day just mentioned. For be it known, old John was both sweet and hot to perfection. John's heat was what is sometimes called anger. And his sweetness came from the fact that most of him was smeared with a neat layer of pure mountain honey.

"Dang it all," he was saying to something that had just disappeared in the brush. "You better beat it, you pesky brute. Dump me in a tub o' honey will you! How will I ever get it out of my hair? 'Tain't nothin' but oil and turpentine that will do it, and I ain't got neither. Of all the dang-rattling-fool grizzlies! Fer about two cents I'd take the old rifle, and put a bullet right through you."

He reached up and ran his fingers through his honey-smeared whiskers.

"Look at that, will you! It took me years to raise that bunch of snow whites, and now they're all stuck together in a ball no bigger than a nut."

He took the precious crop between his thumb and fingers and striped them of the sticky stuff. "That's what comes of a feller having a bear. Oh, you dang brute! I suppose you're over there on the hillside a licking yourself off and enjoying it. If I could only lick myself off I'd be all right. Lucky I didn't have any clothes on."

He waved his hands and shook his fist. The truth is, he was a ludicrous sight standing there in the morning sun, naked as the day he was born—that is, naked except for the smear of honey. He was so ridiculous that no one could have seen him without laughter.

A voice came from the path just below him. "Haw, haw, haw!" came the laugh. "That's a nice bear you got there, John. Ho, ho, ho! John, you're a sight. Haw, haw, haw! Where did you get it? New style bath, eh! Honey! And I

seen your bear a running down the path like he had been stung by a torpedo."

The speaker was Sheriff Byrnnes, who had always taken a keen delight kidding John about his bear. But this time it seems that he had arrived on the scene just in time to find the old man getting the worst of it, albeit he could only guess what had happened; for John Harper Adams darted behind the door and closed it.

"Stay out of here, dang you!" he shouted. "Ain't you got no regard for a man's privations? Wait till I get some of this smear off and some trousers to wear. You might go down and take a pot shot at that pesky Silvertip."

The sheriff tied his horse and sat down on the step; not for a million dollars would he have sent a shot at the old man's bear. But he was mighty curious to learn what had happened. He could hear the old fellow rumbling and grumbling behind the door; but, after a while the grumbling grew fainter. Finally the door opened, and the old man's smiling face stuck out.

"Sorry, sheriff," he spoke, "but you just caught me kind of unawares. Come on in, and I'll cook some breakfast; then we'll talk."

After the sheriff had swallowed seven flapjacks, well smeared with honey, he looked up. John grinned; the sheriff grinned with him.

"Pretty good honey, John," he laughed. "What happened?"

There is nothing like a good meal to take away anger. Now that the old man had some of the sweetness inside of him instead of all on the outside, he was ready to talk.

"Nothing much, sheriff, except you know what a bear is for sweet stuff. You see I hadn't seen old Silvertip for nigh onto a week. He'd been up to the summits snow sliding, I guess; and it just happened that I run across a big bee tree. That was day before yesterday. Well, yesterday I cut it down and had a devil's own time getting the honey. You know what them bee trees sometimes is. Them bees was the most vicious that I ever saw, and in spite of my precaution to handle them some of them ran their bayonets into me. Yep! About nine inches deep for each bayonet. And on top of that I had to work like a horse all day to get the honey. Consequently when I got that tub down here I was pretty near petered out. I just ran it into the bedroom there and flopped. The last thing that I remember I shut the doors and bolted them.

"I must have slept like a log not to hear what was going on. You see, I hadn't spotted old Silvertip for a week, but he must have smelled me getting that there honey. Well, you know what honey means to a bear. He must have come home last night and made up his mind that he would have some. With that stuff inside the cabin, nothing could stop him; so he must have just walked up and shoved his way in. And I was so tired and full of bee stings that you couldn't have woke me with dynamite. No doubt he filled up and then lay down beside the bed. I didn't know he was there; and, this morning when I hopped out to take a swim, I landed right on top of him.

"Then things began to happen. He grunted and jumped, and that landed me head first in that there tub of honey. It scared the bear, but it almost killed me. I pulled myself out, fighting to get my breath. Old Silver knew he was in for it. He just scooted. I guess I was the maddest man on three planets. I grabbed a stick of stove wood, and Silver beat it for the brush. That's what you saw when you came up the path. Me——"

The sheriff was looking at the pancakes; old John laughed.

"Oh, that there honey is all right; it didn't come out of the tub. I had that in the pitcher over there on the

shelf. Anyway, now that you've had my story, what's bringing you here this time in the morning? I suppose it's bandits or murderers again. I suppose you want me and Silvertip to start out on another criminal hunt. If you do, you better postpone it, until that honey is disposed of. Old Silver wouldn't leave it for all the bandits in the universe. That there bear has got the biggest sweet tooth that you ever heard tell of."

Sheriff Byrnnes nodded. "I know, John," he answered, "but I don't think that I need you and Silvertip yet. Just the same, you are right about my being after bandits. That's what a sheriff is for, ain't it? Only this time I'm after something worse than a plain bandit. I'm after a bunch of killers.

"You heard of that bunch that got loose down in Sacramento? Six men convicted for murder escaped from the pen. They've been hunted all over the valley and now they're up in our country. They say they've hit it into the Siskiyous, and you know what this section is to hole up in. Two of them know the country like a book. They're killers every one.

"They ain't a chance in the world of taking them peaceably, because they know they have got the noose ahead of them. So I'm aiming to head them off. I might have come with a posse, but a posse is too conspicuous—makes too much noise and spreads out too much. That's why I thought I'd sneak in alone. I left town quietly last night and aimed to get here about daylight. As soon as I get some rest I'm going on in. I think I know where those crooks are aiming for. If I get there ahead of them I'll know just what to do. This is going to be a hard job, and I don't propose to have too many of my boys killed off."

It was not the first time that the sheriff had done a fool trick like that. The old man shook his head.

"Tain't fair, sheriff," he said. "Your life is altogether too valuable to be running into a nest of hornets like that. Now me and Silvertip is both of us specialists in the bee line. You——"

"I know," answered the other. "Just the same I'm going alone. If I need you, I'll manage to let you know; and mebbe we'll have a little fun."

Two hours later the old man watched the sheriff ascend the mountain. His horse nodded along the steep trail. At a clearing high up on the mountainside, the officer stopped and waved his hat. And that was the last that John saw of him. He returned to his cabin and his honey. He had a job of house cleaning ahead of him; and he knew that the job would last just as long as he kept hiding the honey from the bear. So he concluded it best to let his pet grizzly gorge his fill and be done with it.

"Dang your old hide," he called, when he dragged the tub into the open. "Come on and finish it. It's a nice how-dee-do when a good-looking old man like me has got to get full o' bee stings for a pesky bear. But I ain't the kind to cry over spilled milk. You're a pretty good bear at that. So here's your honey."

Old Silvertip was down by the river. He had taken his morning swim and just now he was sitting contentedly on the bank licking himself off. It was the sweetest washing that he had ever had, but most of the honey had been cleaned away. He was getting hungry again. He heard the old man's voice, and he was just wise enough to know from the tone of the call that the old man had something to eat. So he waddled up the bank and started in on the tub. After that he lay down in the shade of the cabin and slept.

Old John had pulled out his pipe. The day was perfect. As the afternoon wore off the insects buzzed, and the evening murmurs began to float in from the great forest. He dozed into slumber,

his pipe drooping over his whiskers and finally falling into his lap.

Then all of a sudden his chair was upset, and he saw the bear scooting behind the cabin. He had heard a shot. Simultaneously chips began shattering from the planks above his head. The old man had landed on his knees and had pulled his .45. At the same time he knew that it would do him no good. That shot had come from a rifle, and the man who was doing the shooting was up on the mountain. Another shot sent him creeping around the building and into the back door. He pulled the old trusty from the leathers on the wall.

"Gosh whack it!" he said. "I guess the sheriff was right this time. Only he needn't have gone in so far to catch them. Mebbe they're figuring on getting my provisions. It looks like we was up against another siege. Drat these mountains anyway. They're so peaceable and quiet that you'd think a fellow could rest a hundred years. Instead of that you can't even get an afternoon's snooze without some one taking a pot shot at you with a rifle."

The fellow on the mountain, evidently tired of waiting for the old man to show himself, took a shot at the cabin. He was using black powder. That gave the old man his opportunity; he lifted the old trusty and whaled away. A yell went up from the mountainside, and after that there was a scurry through the brush. Old John sent up two more shots.

"Thought so," he muttered. "Well, boys, if you want to play with Sheriff Byrnnes and old John, you got your hands full. We ain't prune pickers like they've got down in the valley, and mebbe you'll find it out. If you can beat us, you're welcome. Only——"

Then he stopped. He had suddenly thought of Sheriff Byrnnes. The sheriff had gone over the mountains in that very direction. Perhaps they had met up with him and had picked him off. The sheriff was on horseback and would be an easy mark. He had taken too long a chance. John lit his pipe and went back into the cabin. He had seen Silvertip scooting into the brush, but just now he was not interested in the bear. He realized that the cabin would not be safe during the night. Those bandits were after his provisions. Old John made up his mind to go to the help of the sheriff. So without ado he pulled out the kit that he had used so many times before. Then, when it was evening, he slid out of the back door and into the woods.

He struck straight over the mountains. If the bandits were familiar with the country there was one place that they would surely be. Old John shuddered when he thought of it. They could hold that place against an army. All they needed was provisions. And evidently they knew it.

He went up the ridges; dodging through the underbrush and following the hidden trails. All night long! The moon came over the mountains and spread a silver light. All the time he kept thinking of the officer, the bandits, and the bear he had left back in the woods behind the cabin. He was not afraid for the bear, because Silvertip would never betray himself to strangers. The man who caught him would have to be very clever indeed. Yet he knew that Silver would hang around that honey. Maybe something would happen.

Along toward daylight he crossed to a big cañon and descended to a roaring river. His way followed through the alders and along the smooth-washed sand bars. Here he ran across some tracks. The first ones were those of a horse. That would be Sheriff Byrnnes. He followed the trail for an hour; then he found something else. That something was a man's footprint—a long track that by no manner of reasoning

could have belonged to the officer. Soon it was joined by a shorter one. The tracks had a way of slipping into clumps of underbrush as if the men who had made them were stalking something.

Old John knew that the sheriff was heading into the wild country just ahead, and that it would grow steeper and more difficult until it was almost inaccessible. Always he watched the ground waiting for the tracks to unfold the story. He got another chapter in the sands before long. More tracks! Evidently the sheriff had dismounted and stopped to study. After that the horse's tracks turned into a side cañon. John read that the sheriff had run across tracks coming down, and that the men had slipped to one side and had then cut in farther down the stream to follow the sheriff back. It looked bad. There was a path for a horse; but it was a difficult one. The sheriff would have his hands full.

All of a sudden John stopped short. He had found a piece of rag hanging between two jagged pieces of rock. Also there were footprints below and signs of a scuffle. He picked the rag up wonderingly and studied it. It was a round piece, evidently a part of a sleeve. He recalled that the sheriff had worn a blue shirt the day before. This was the same color and the same material. Something had happened! A little higher up on the trail he came across more evidence. Three shells—.45s—such as the sheriff always used. He hoped they were the sheriff's, but he could not be sure. They were a common caliber, and there was a chance that they might have belonged to the outlaws.

Still the track went on. The sheriff might be riding, or he might be packing; and there might be a dead man just ahead. The old man trailed cautiously, listening to every sound, and ready at a sweep to bring up his .45. The trees stood thick; boulders as big as houses hung along the sides. Twelve miles ahead they would ascend the last peaks and come into a landscape that was the devil's own playground. There was a crater there and water at all times of the year. Just the place for an outlaw to hide in. And beyond the crater was a stretch of country that could hardly be crossed. Still the tracks continued. For a while the old man had no way of reading them. The horse had gone first and the men after. Perhaps, after all, the sheriff was safe.

But just when he got to thinking that, the old man saw something sticking beside the path. He stopped suddenly and picked up a hat. It was that of Sheriff Byrnnes! The tracks were plain now. Something had happened, and the sheriff was dropping clews. That was just what he would do if he were in trouble. And the easiest thing and the most plausible would be to shake off his hat. John let it lie where he had found it. The sheriff had a wise head. So instead of picking things up, John began adding to them. He started dropping articles of his own. He kept it up for half a mile. All at once he heard something in a side ravine. A whinney! A horse!

Old John stopped. There could be no doubt of it. For a minute he feared a trap. Then he climbed some boulders and came by a short cut into the ravine. What he found made him swear under his breath.

It was the sheriff's horse. The poor animal had been tied with all the cruelty of a devil's ingenuity. Its head had been trussed with a rawhide rope straight up to a limb. The rope had been tied and retied and wound around its neck. The horse's feet could touch the ground, but that was all. How the poor animal had ever kept from choking and strangling was more than John could make out. It was the work of a fiend—and that fiend had got the sheriff! Perhaps the sheriff was dead! John cut the rawhide and led the horse to the stream.

"Dang them," he muttered. "The sheriff was right. Them fellers would torture their own mother. Any man what would do that ain't nothing but a dog. And he ain't a dog neither, because a dog can show some mercy. I guess, John, you got work ahead. You and Sheriff Byrnnes has had many a run together, but this is the first time that the sheriff was ever fool enough to get caught. Yep! Looks like he'd been a fool all right. Why didn't he ask me to go with him in the first place? Now I simply got to play a lone hand against one of the toughest bunches that ever hit these here mountains. But I won't have to play a lone hand if that horse lives up to his nature."

He reached into his jumper and pulled out a stub of a pencil; then he took a piece of pine wood and whittled it flat. He wrote on the surface:

Found sheriff's horse and saddle here on Loon Creek. Looks like foul play. Am heading in toward the Devil's Nose country. Nest up there. Bandits thick as bees. Come soon. JOHN HARPER ADAMS.

"Gosh whack 'em!" he muttered again. "When they read that down at the stable, they'll be getting busy. Them boys think more of the sheriff than I do of my right eye. All I got to do now is to keep on going in. We'll see what we see."

He thought of the outlaws on the mountain in front of his cabin. No doubt there were two or three of them. They would loot the cabin, and then hit back for the rendezvous; but they would hardly start before daylight. He must be several miles ahead of them. Whether they were the ones who had done for the sheriff he could not know. Also he thought of the bear; he wondered whether the old fellow would follow. If he did—— Well, he might come in handy. He led the horse down the trail and turned him loose. To make sure, he threw some pebbles.

Two hours later he was among the heights. It was getting along toward evening. He found no more trace of the sheriff, although the tracks continued. Just at sundown he came to a little flat. He saw a small tree, fresh cut, in the opening. It proved to be a tree such as he had brought down three days before. Scraps of dirty comb and rotten honey were scattered about. A bee tree made him think of Silvertip. Also, it told him that, henceforth, he would have to redouble his care.

"By jingo!" he muttered. "Them fellers ain't far away, or they wouldn't be packing that honey. Sure looks like they was getting ready for a siege. I got to get into their den before they know it. If I ever sneak in with my .45 they'll think that something besides bees is stinging 'em. And if I don't get in, a whole army won't be able to storm that place where they're holing up."

He had made up his mind to go on without attempting to ambush the fellows who were coming in with the loot from his cabin. He wanted to find the sheriff first. The light was getting precious, and the way was short. Unless he got through before dark, he would have to stop. There was a path, but in the darkness one step wrongly placed would send him to perdition.

The time came when he was almost ready to give up. In the semidarkness it took both hands and feet to feel his way. To make it worse he could hear nothing for the rush of snow waters among the rocks. Consequently he did not see, and he could not hear, the man crouching on a rock above him. It all came suddenly. A swift sweep above him—then a blurr of stars. Then another blow on the head. That second blow knocked him unconscious.

He must have been out a long time. He knew that he had been outwitted and that his life was worth next to nothing. He blinked and tried to remember. They had caught the sheriff, and now they

had picked up John Harper Adams. He was being carried; that was what he could not understand. If they were the desperadoes that they were supposed to be, why had they not killed him? Then he saw that the moon was shining. That would mean that it was close to morning and that he had been unconscious a long time. After that he realized that they were going downhill. One man had a hold of his feet and the other was holding his arms. He heard the man at his feet talking.

"We're almost there, kid," he was saying. "I'm like you. This 'ere thing of packing these bos in gets me goat. But I guess the chief's right when he says they'll come in handy w'en the tough stuff begins. They ain't a-going to pull off anyt'ing fancy if they knows that we've got their sheriff and this fellow up here all ready to plug any time they gets started. Only w'en we do begin plugging, I wants the chief to let me have a chance at this 'un. He's too dang heavy, an' I wants pay fer me work."

John's mind was working under difficulties; but he managed to realize what had happened. Hostages! He and the sheriff would be held as a threat—perhaps for a ransom. Whoever the chief was, he could not be called a fool. He had seen a chance, and it was a chance in a million. That was why John had not been killed. But just then the fellow gave a wrench at the old man's neck. It almost broke it. The pain was too much. Blackness came again.

The next he knew he was lying on his side in a clear spot shaded by trees and surrounded by high rocks. He was looking at a pair of eyes that were watching his—keen eyes that seemed to be waiting. At first, he thought it was a nightmare and that he was just waking up. He had seen those eyes before. They belonged to somebody that he knew—but why was the fellow staring? That was his first fleeting thought. Then came remembrance. The shot on the hill, his trip, the finding of the sheriff's horse, and his attempt to scale the Devil's Nose without being caught. He had been hit and had been carried in. And now he was looking at a man trussed and tied as he was himself, and that man was Sheriff Byrnnes!

The sheriff was bound completely; there was a gag in his mouth; but his eyes were speaking. One eye, the right one, dropped in a solemn wink. Old John had just been on the point of saying something, but that wink shut him up. What did the sheriff mean? He turned to see what was going on. He saw a guard standing close by with a brace of .45s. Also there were rifles and ammunition—a veritable arsenal—on the ground close by. His own .45 was on the table. The guard was turning it over and looking at the notches in the handle. Then he looked at old John. He saw that he was conscious.

"Yeh," he said, "old boy! It's a good thing we got you first, eh? You're a pretty clever coot wid a gun according to them notches—unless they're fakes. Most likely they're fakes," he laughed and took his knife to cut off a piece of jerked meat. John saw, then, that their store of provisions was prodigious. Most likely they had been looting and gathering them up, all along their way in.

John started to talk, but just then he got another solemn wink from the sheriff. He wanted to know what that wink meant. It took him some time to figure it out; then he got it. The sheriff wanted him to keep his mouth shut. They had gagged the sheriff, but they had forgotten to do the same with old John. A voice came in handy if you used it at the right time, and it was the only weapon that they had left. So he shut his mouth tight and solemnly winked his eye to let the other know that he understood. The sheriff winked his left eye in an answer back. Old

John was quick to get the purport of the winks. The sheriff had winked his right eye for "no" and his left eye for "yes"—which was at least a code to go by. The bandit began talking again.

"Yeah," he was saying. "You're the old guy what had that cabin, eh? Well, the boys will soon be getting in with your stuff. We're sitting pretty here." He took a pancake and spread it with a layer of amber stuff. "Even honey! We're up here, and we've got freedom. Down there they had us in cells all ready to string us up. We had a hard time crossing the valley, but now we're up here where we kin take it easy. They ain't no one kin come in unless we says so. And if they do, we've got you fellows to pop off to make 'em be good. See! And, if we've got to die, we'll die fightin'. It beats a rope."

John was thinking about that honey and about that bee tree. Also he was thinking about the sheriff's horse and the message that he had sent back the night before. The horse would go straight home, and he was one of the best in the country. He ought to be there now. He could picture the men in the town when they found that note and the empty saddle. They would come with a bound. There would be fighting. Then he stopped. He remembered the bear. That bee tree! They were coming in with his stock of provisions. Perhaps they would take some of the honey. Silvertip! And Silvertip would take care not to be seen. Trust a grizzly for that!

All that day old John and his gagged companion lay there on the ground. The sun passed up and went down. Evidently the guard thought too much of his own comfort to think of his prisoners. They got neither food nor drink. Time and again John looked at the sheriff and each time he got the wink out of the left eye. Sheriff Byrnnes was waiting. Night came, and with it a sort of relief. Old John managed to sleep. It was the only thing he could do under the circumstances. When he awoke it was daylight, and the camp was full of new arrivals. They were sitting at the crude table and passing their coarse jokes.

"Yeah," said one. "The old fellow's waking up. Pass over the honey. You popped him, eh, Bill? That was good work. Good thing you got him. We got his grub, and you got the old fellow himself. Great idea that! If things come to the worst, and they get to shooting too hard from the outside, we can take the sheriff and him and hold them up for shields, eh? Pass over that honey! Good pancakes and honey! Ought to have some butter, but that honey hits the spot to a fancy. You filled up one of them buckets, eh? We found some honey down to the old man's, but something had cleaned it out. Whole tub. I got some in a jug, but the pesky thing busted on me."

John counted the men. There were four of them. Evidently the other two were up on the point, standing guard. He expected, each minute, to hear some shooting. He knew that he was on the second day, and that the men from town would be approaching the Devil's Nose. What would come after that, he did not know. He started thinking again, and all of a sudden he stopped doing even that. He had turned his head, and he was looking straight into the underbrush. And he was looking at something that almost made him shout for joy. He was looking straight at old Silvertip!

Silvertip! Yes, it was the inquisitive old grizzly. He was standing hidden in the brush, with only his snout sticking out. His little pig eyes were glued on John. He seemed to be waiting as if trying to figure what it was all about. John knew that the bear could climb the heights without being seen. He had followed either his master or the honey, the old man did not know which. But

he did know that the big fellow was sniffing at the table. Just then John looked at the sheriff—the sheriff evidently had seen, too. He was winking out of his left eye. That meant "Yes;" and old John acted. He raised his head.

"Hello, Silver! Come on, Silver!"

Then everything happened at once. The bear stepped into the open where the men were seated. The men were unaccustomed to grizzlies! One of them pulled a .45 and let the bear have it. The bullet struck the grizzly on the shoulder and ripped down his back.

The bear exploded like a ton of dynamite! He came with a roar, all paws swinging. A grizzly is afraid of nothing under the sun, when mad; and he can lick all the bandits that ever lived, if he gets at close quarters. Bandits were going up into the air and landing on their heads. One had been torn to pieces with a stroke of a paw, and another was draped around a tree trunk. The last one fell unhurt but frightened out of a year's growth. He was close by old John.

The old man was yelling! Finally he caught the bear's attention. The bear stopped only to see the bucket of honey. Nothing could attract him after that. The bandit was cringing. Old John was talking. And all the while the bear was licking the honey out of the pail, looking on as if he intended to finish his meal with a fat outlaw. Old John was making the best use of the man's terror. He knew that the fellow would have fought to the last inch rather than give up. But being eaten by a grizzly was a different matter altogether.

"No use, boys," said old John. "He's a bad one. He belongs to me. You're a goner sure, unless you let me take care o' him. You see what he did to your pals. Well, now, you better cut me loose and let me take care of him. I can handle him in a jiffy."

The ruse worked and the bandit cut the rawhide. In just two minutes John was a free man. He had caught up one of the .45s, and he was ready for anything. The bear went on eating the honey. It was that which had really brought him. One of the outlaws had taken a jug, and it had broken on the trail. Silver had followed. In a jiffy John had the bandit disarmed and the sheriff unbound.

"Come on, sheriff," said John. "We've got this one tied up, and the others are done for. Silver will come with us when he finishes that honey. We better go up and get the other two."

On the way to the height he explained to Sheriff Byrnnes how he had found his horse and had sent back the message. The posse was due any minute. All they had to do was to catch the bandits from the inside.

And sure enough just as they crept to the top they heard a shot, and then a volley. After that a voice.

"Yah! Well, come and get us." Some one was shouting. "We'll show you yahoos what we've got."

Old John turned to the sheriff. "Hear that?" he said. "Those crooks haven't the least idea what's happened. Well, sheriff, I just want you to let me finish it up."

And the sheriff did. Fifteen minutes later the old man was standing between two meek bandits, both of whom had broken wrists. John had been doing some more fancy shooting! He was waving to the men in the rocks down below. Sheriff Byrnnes was standing beside him. Just as the posse reached the top, an old silvertip grizzly came up behind his master and looked down to see what it was all about.

"How did you do it, sheriff?" came the voice.

"We didn't," called the sheriff. "Old John and I just lay still and talked out of our eyes. That bear sure has got a wallop, and he sure does like honey. Come on up, and we'll give you the particulars."

With the Hammer on Safety

by Frank Triem

Author of "One Year on the Rock Pile," etc.

JOE BULLARD edged a trifle closer to the margin of the precipice and stared over and down into the desert below. Incredibly hot and bright, the sun poured down its fiery rays from almost directly overhead; the scanty undergrowth of sage gave no shade to the man lying on his stomach among the rocks.

Bullard inched his loosely built frame forward until he was able to follow with his shifty eyes the progress of the half dozen men below. They were slowly approaching the foot of the cliff on whose lip he was concealed. As they rode forward he could make out that the man in the lead was Sheriff Fred Turner; and at sight of him the fleeing killer's hand moved to the butt of his single-action .45.

For two weeks now he had fled toward Mexico with a half dozen grim-faced men on his heels and the whole country on the lookout for him. The revolting murder for which he was wanted had set the entire region against him so that he had been forced to skulk through the hills on his southward journey, sleeping during the day and limping on at night. He knew the district thoroughly, and this perhaps was the only thing that saved him from capture. Another in his place would by now have been behind the bars.

Since the start of his flight Joe Bullard had lived on what little he could pick up—which hadn't been much. A scant two days of harried travel lay behind him when his horse had been killed in a fall; the murderer had found himself in a nasty predicament. For a time he had hoped to be able to steal another mount; but Sheriff Fred Turner, finding the dead animal, had sent out word for all to watch their

horses. The result had been that his two attempts to get another animal had almost resulted in capture.

Joe Bullard's hand curled for a brief moment around the stock of his .45, then came away. Hatred for Fred Turner was in his heart and he would have given much to see the officer go down before his smoking gun muzzle; but though Turner was now a scanty seventy-five yards away Bullard didn't shoot. It wasn't that he feared capture, for he would almost have surrendered his freedom to drop the sheriff; he was afraid he couldn't hit him. When Bullard had emptied his weapon into the body of his victim, the cartridges had been loaded with a particularly corrosive type of smokeless—a glycerine powder used before the advent of nitro-cellulose explosives; and he had had no opportunity to clean it. The previous day he had inspected it and had found the barrel pitted unbelievably. To make matters worse he had slipped on a jagged stone, had fallen and had landed on the holstered weapon. This accident had twisted the blade front sight to one side.

So, though Joe Bullard would have given his life if only he could have been sure of killing Sheriff Fred Turner, he didn't fire. Instead he let the gun back into its holster and lay motionless, watching the progress of his enemy. Sheriff Turner and his men rode along the base of the cliff until Bullard could have dropped a pebble on their big, wide-brimmed hats. As he didn't do so, however, they remained unaware of his presence. They went on until they were concealed from view behind a curve in the granite cliff.

After a time Joe Bullard got to his feet and limped on. He was talking to himself in a croaking whisper; promising that if he got within close range he would drive five bullets into the body of his enemy—and put the sixth through his own skull.

He had been on the move almost continuously for the last sixteen or eighteen hours. The previous night he had made a good fifteen miles through a wild, broken region; but with the pale yellow of the eastern horizon warning him of the coming of day, he had prepared to hole up—and from a low ridge had seen the sheriff and his deputies far behind. He believed he was within twenty miles of the Mexican border, so he had gone forward. From now on it would be a game of hide and seek, with himself doing the hiding. Unless, of course, he could get within twenty yards or so of Sheriff Turner.

That morning as the sun rose Joe Bullard had found water. In a little niche among some big rocks he had located it—perhaps a gallon or two of slimy liquid. He had gulped some of it eagerly; now however he found himself desperately in need of more. His stomach ached and burned for food; but the big, loosely built man with the receding chin and forehead didn't know where he could get any. That was something he would have to leave to Providence, or whatever power might be watching over his sordid career.

Bullard did know, however, where he could get a drink. Two or three miles ahead of him was a little oasis, at which the traveler could easily find plenty of good water. He hadn't been by that way for several years; but he thought he could locate the place. He remembered that there had been a deserted cabin concealed among the tangle of underbrush surrounding the springs. Here Bullard could rest a bit before continuing his journey. He decided he would do so, even at the price of possible capture.

One hour later, off to his left two or three hundred yards, the fugitive saw the acre or so of gray-green undergrowth that suggested the presence of water. He had left the hills and the cliff behind until they were only a vague

hint of brown against the blazing blue sky; ahead as far as he could see was the desert—level, monotonous, deadly. Most people would have been lost but Bullard knew his way around. He turned and limped unsteadily toward the springs.

Ten minutes after sighting the oasis he pushed through the matted undergrowth and was upon the dim path that led deeper into the tangle. With the thought of water spurring him on Bullard hurried forward. He rounded a turn and came within sight of the rocky pool. The liquid steamed in the burning sunlight but he noted that the usual green scum was absent. The water was clean.

And then he had sprawled upon his hands and knees at the margin of the spring and was drinking in long gulps. The stuff was more than lukewarm but that didn't bother him. He presently raised his head long enough to catch his breath; then once more dropped his face to the pool.

It was as he was getting back to his feet that a whisper of sound from behind brought him around, hand on gun and a snarl on his lips. Joe Bullard's weapon was out as he came about, and his thumb brought back the big hammer with a jerk.

But he didn't fire. Instead of the grim form of Sheriff Fred Turner he found himself confronted by a little, wrinkled old man. For the first time the killer noticed that the cabin concealed among the tangled underbrush showed signs of habitation.

Then the other was advancing toward him, a pleased, almost childish smile on his thin face. He reminded the big fellow of a sparrow as with hand outstretched in greeting he came forward.

Joe Bullard's thumb left the hammer. With his face contorted by a leering grin, he stepped in close. At the same time he swung his weapon up and brought it down in a semicircle that had as its base the top of the old man's head. The blow landed squarely; with a gurgling cry Bullard's victim went down.

For a time the killer stared silently at the sprawled form. The other wasn't dead he saw; he twitched a trifle and was breathing uncertainly. Bullard licked his lips, then dropped to his knees at the fallen man's side. One after another he went through the pockets.

He had come to the last one and had found nothing when his expression of disapproval was changed to one of inquiry. His groping fingers came in contact with a series of little, smooth objects; drawing them out he found himself staring down at half a dozen good-sized nuggets. They were worn as if with long handling.

"Gold!" Joe Bullard found himself mumbling. "Gold—and I wonder——"

He peered at the cabin. He knew that the motionless figure had no weapon, and now he turned toward the structure. The finding of the nuggets had stirred the killer's cupidity, and he was resolved to search the place. His victim might have a cache somewhere; and if so Bullard meant to possess it.

He entered the open door and stood peering about him through the gloom. The air in here was hot and lifeless; he discerned a bunk at one end of the apartment, a crude table and two chairs. There was a small stove of the portable variety standing on an up-ended packing crate.

Hiding places in this cabin were few, but two minutes later Joe Bullard gave a grunt of satisfaction. Out from under the bunk he had hauled a heavily built chest; it was the work of but a moment to pry back the lid.

He found himself staring down at a layer of neatly folded clothes. The odor of mothballs rose to his nostrils; he sniffed disapprovingly then hauled out a handful of the apparel and glowered at it. Fancy shirts and expensive chaps

met his gaze. He threw the stuff to the floor and continued his depredations.

He had almost reached the bottom of the chest when he came upon a bulky bundle wrapped in aged canvas and tied with a length of cord. This looked more promising; with trembling fingers Bullard undid the twine and peeled the canvas from the inner object.

He gave a surprised exclamation as the thing lay exposed in his hand. It was a gun; but such a gun as the murderer had never before seen. An old-time single-action .45, similar to his —but similar in name and caliber only. This weapon had carved pearl handles, inlaid with gold; the frame and barrel were gold-plated and elaborately engraved. In the dim light the weapon gleamed and glowed until an answering sparkle came into the big man's close-set eyes. He forgot all about the nuggets in his joy.

There came a sound of uncertain steps from outside. He turned slowly. An instant later the little old man wavered into the cabin and collapsed upon one of the crude chairs. Blood flowed in a trickle down one withered cheek; he stared unseeingly at the killer.

Joe Bullard strode across and with one big hand shook the other roughly.

"I'm taking your gun, old man," he told his host. "Same caliber as mine; but I reckon I need a reliable gat worse'n you do. So we'll just trade."

"Trade?" the other muttered uncomprehendingly. "Trade?"

Joe Bullard drew his own damaged weapon and quickly ejected the ammunition from it. He tossed the arm contemptuously across the cabin and into the chest. Spinning the gold-plated cylinder of his find, he shoved the cartridges into the six chambers and thrust the weapon into his holster.

A sudden snort from the direction of the open door brought him about. He found himself staring at the long, almost human face of a mule. The creature gazed soberly back at him; Bullard noted that its hair was almost white. The animal was very old, but he was transportation.

Joe Bullard crossed to the mule and inspected it. Then with the loose twine taken from the package in which he found the gun he fashioned a sort of crude hackamore; a second later he was on the beast's back.

His new-found mount snorted indignantly, but it made no effort to unseat the big man. Bullard steered it from the cabin and was headed into the brush when a cry from behind brought his head around. The old man stood swaying in the door of the building.

"That mule and gun belonged to my —son——" he was saying. "Please leave——"

With an oath Bullard once more faced the tangle. He kicked the aged animal in the ribs and the creature moved unwillingly away.

Ten minutes later, from out in the desert, the killer looked back. He could see the old man of the cabin standing at the margin of the oasis, watching him in silence. When a little afterward he once more glanced behind him the other had disappeared.

On across a molten desert the man and the mule plodded slowly. Joe Bullard sat slumped upon the creature's back, his thin shoulders drooping and his arms hanging limp at his sides. Above him the sun hovered like a white-hot basket ball; heat waves billowed up like smoke from the sage-covered desert. About him in various directions he saw the blue lakes of the mirage; and once or twice the apparition of green trees sprouting from the sands greeted his shifty eyes. It was a very hot day, even for the desert. Bullard found himself mopping the perspiration from his face and neck and at the same time kicking the mule in the ribs.

But the creature refused to be hurried. This might have been pure mul-

ishness; or it might have been because he couldn't hurry. He was very old, and Bullard perceived that he hadn't seen service for many a year. As he plodded forward the best he could do was a sort of spiritless shuffle. Bullard cursed and fretted; but short of getting off and dragging his mount, he was helpless. And after all he was saving his own strength—which counted for a great deal.

He estimated that he must be some ten miles from the border. Noon had come and passed, and now the day was at its very hottest. Under most circumstances the killer would have holed up until it got cooler: but he didn't know how near or in what direction Sheriff Fred Turner and his men might be; and, also, there was no place in which he would be free from baking, blinding sunlight.

There was just one thing that bothered the murderer. That was the fact that he must leave the United States with Sheriff Turner unharmed. The enmity between the two men dated back to their early boyhood. Now that Bullard had the stigma of murder attached to him, he felt that he might as well settle the old grudge. If only there were some way he could come at the officer! Short of actually hunting him up he couldn't see any; and he sent the mule shambling forward with a disgruntled kick.

An hour or so later he was forced to dismount and walk a while in order to permit the beast to rest itself. The mule was very old; his legs and muscles were stiff, and he breathed in great gasps. Bullard walked a mile or so, then once more mounted.

Often the killer scanned the horizon; but always he found it vacant of life. Sheriff Turner and his half dozen deputies were probably somewhere ahead, he told himself. They had passed him when he was on the cliff; and his visit to the spring and the cabin had allowed them to gain considerable ground. In a way that was good, and in another way not so good. He didn't have to worry about an attack from the rear, but when he got to the border he might find himself ambushed. He would have to be careful.

Slowly the long afternoon wore itself away; and, slowly, the heat let up in its terrible onslaught. Man and mule still drooped under the burning rays, but it was not as bad as it had been. Bullard mumbled a curse and mopped the perspiration from his face with his already drenched handkerchief.

"Wait till we get into Mexico, you old fish bait!" he told the mule. "I bet I'll speed you up—with a .45 bullet. You'll show more pep than you have so far, I'm betting!"

A time came when, looking ahead, Joe Bullard perceived a low line of hills before him. That cheered him a trifle; for he remembered that a hilly region bordered the Rio Grande hereabouts. As he came closer he thought he recognized a low saddle-back upon which grew a forest of smoke treees.

It was perhaps half an hour later and he had come within a mile or so of the base of the hills, when, glancing back, Bullard uttered a savage oath. He stared for a moment, then once more faced the hills. He rained heavy kicks upon the mule's ribs, and the dejected animal somehow managed to break into a stiff canter. Far behind and off to the left his keen eyes had picked up a number of black dots that moved. Undoubtedly after wandering about Sheriff Turner and his men had stumbled upon his trail; but had they yet seen him?

Although he couldn't be sure, he didn't think so.

For the next ten minutes he watched the specks anxiously, while his mount carried him at a jerky run toward the hills. They reached the base of the chain and began to climb along a rock-

strewn barranca. The sun, he saw, was dropping low upon the horizon; soon now it would be gone. With darkness he could easily evade his pursuers. He could get across the line and disappear.

At the beginning of the upward journey the ancient mule dropped his stiff-legged trot to a laboring walk. Joe Bullard cursed and pleaded; but he couldn't hurry his mount's pace. Later he glanced back and saw that the specks were now visible as men and horses. They were a scant mile behind him and were gaining fast.

He was within two hundred yards of the saddle-back when at last the decrepit mule gave out completely. With an almost human moan the animal halted; for an instant it wabbled uncertainly. Then its legs gave way and it collapsed. The killer hurled himself clear and stood glowering about him. Although his hand curled around the pearl stock of the gun, he didn't shoot his late mount. That wasn't because he felt any gratitude; but he knew he would soon need every cartridge.

A moment later he had turned and was scrambling on up the rocky slope toward the summit. His heart was pounding with trip-hammer blows and his breath came in labored gasps; but he stumbled on. The red light of sunset painted the rocks and sand a ruddy orange. A black cloud shot with sparks gathered in front of his eyes. He fought it off grimly and staggered forward.

And then he reached the summit of the saddle-back. He gave a strangled cry of exultation. He was staring down a sort of inclined plain; half a mile away were the banks of the Rio Grande, and beyond he saw the brush-covered hills of Old Mexico. Still farther off, all but invisible in a blue twilight haze, were the higher mountains. Joe Bullard knew he was as good as safe.

He turned a moment later and walked deliberately back across the low ridge. From behind a boulder he was looking down at the posse, three quarters of a mile away. He saw that they had gathered in an excited group; he surmised that they realized he had won the race. He grinned a wolfish grin and watched.

He presently saw them split up; five of them were riding on toward him, while the sixth approached the hills at a diagonal course that would land him five hundred yards or so farther down the ridge. Bullard flushed, then went pale. For that sixth man was Sheriff Fred Turner; there was no mistaking the erect, lithe carriage or the big bay gelding the other bestrode.

With a look of hatred upon his flabby face, the killer considered for a moment. This was his chance to get back at Turner for those years of strife, he told himself. Turner was headed for an eminence from which he could see the entire region for miles, Bullard realized. The sheriff would be alone, five or six hundred yards from his men. It was an opportunity to meet him, face to face.

Bullard turned and cautiously made his way back over the ridge until he was concealed from the men on the flats below. Then he headed to his left and broke into a stumbling run. The sun had dropped beyond the horizon, and now a golden twilight was thickening upon the hills and the desert and the distant river. Everything was in his favor, the killer told himself. He could drop Turner and vanish into the gathering darkness. By morning he would be far over the other side of the line.

He went some five hundred yards before turning at right angles and cautiously making his way back to the summit. At the top of a sort of cañon, he took refuge behind another large boulder. He reasoned that the officer would strike the foot of that cañon and, finding it smoother going, would come up it. From here the killer would be in a position to surprise him. He

decided he would make that surprise a good one. A little scheme had come to him as he hurried toward this point.

From far down the ravine he caught the click of hoof upon stone. Bullard stiffened; his lips drew back from his tobacco-stained teeth in a mirthless snarl. One big hand fell upon the handle of the .45. An instant later he had drawn out the gold-mounted and engraved weapon. It glittered and twinkled in the soft dusk.

A period of silence—thick, ominous silence—followed that clatter of stone. Then again it came; nearer, this time, and louder. Bullard fancied he could detect the hoofbeats of the approaching sheriff's mount. Another minute and another—then he was sure of it.

He peered cautiously past the margin of the rock. One hundred yards below him the murderer saw a horseman approaching. Even through the gloom Bullard perceived that the sheriff's big gelding was in bad shape. The sheriff would also be in bad shape in another two minutes, he told himself with silent laughter.

Closer sounded the hoofbeats, and yet closer. There came a time when the man behind the rock could hear the horse's loud breathing. An instant afterward Sheriff Turner spoke.

"Easy, old boy!" he mumbled to his mount. "Take it easy——"

Another five yards, and another. Bullard glanced past the rock. Turner and the gelding were but twenty yards away. The murderer licked his lips, gathered his muscles—and got to his feet. As he did so, his eyes upon the sheriff, he drew back the hammer of the gun.

"Hands up!" he snarled.

He saw the officer jerk back on the reins; the gelding came to an abrupt halt. Next second Fred Turner's hands were extended high above his head. Bullard laughed a grating laugh.

"Thought you was purty smart, didn't you, Mister Turner?" he mocked. "Well, I'm just twice as smart as you are! And if you don't believe it—*take this!*"

Deliberately covering the other's chest, he pulled the trigger. Only an empty snap rewarded him.

Both men were paralyzed with surprise—Turner at Bullard's treachery and also at the failure of the gun; his opponent because the weapon had refused to function.

The killer was the first to recover. With an enraged yell he drew back the hammer and once more released it. Another snap rewarded him. Again he lifted the cocking piece——

And then Sheriff Turner came to life. Bullard dropped the gun and spun about as he saw his opponent lower his hands and draw. The killer was running.

He had taken two or three steps when from behind a gun boomed. Joe Bullard lurched dizzily but ran on. Again came that barking explosion. Something caught him in the thigh. Vaguely he was aware of his agonized outcry, of striking the earth. Then everything else was blotted out. He lay quite still while Sheriff Turner, puffing and still pale, got from his horse and advanced.

Joe Bullard came to an hour or so later to find that his legs were tied under the body of a horse and that his wrists were handcuffed behind him. One arm had been done up in bandages; and his thigh ached amazingly. Bullard groaned and stared about him.

On every hand rode mounted men while at his side was Sheriff Fred Turner. The officer stared curiously at him; and in the misty moonlight Bullard saw that his old enemy was smiling. An instant later the latter spoke.

"You almost had me that time, Joe," he told his prisoner. "I reckon except for Providence you would have. You'd have got me, with any gun excepting old 'Pop' Fuller's——"

For a long time all were silent. Sheriff Turner was staring musingly off across the desert. At length he resumed.

"Y'see, Joe, it belongs to old Pop Fuller; he's had it ever since he was a boy, I reckon. He married long time ago; an' he had a son, what he give this gun to to cut his teeth on. But old Pop didn't want to take no chances on the youngster hurting hisself with it; so he filed the firing pin down until it was just too short to touch the primer of a cartridge. Gun's O. K. otherwise; an' with the hammer on safety a feller wouldn't never know the difference.

"My ole' gran'maw used to quote something about everything shiny not being gold. This gun ain't no exception. Gold-plated she is; but as a weepon it ain't in it with a good club. Reckon it's just as well for me it ain't!"

A WOMAN DUDE WRANGLER

AS a rule, the job of "dude wrangler" or guide and mentor of the guests on the "dude" or tourist ranches of the West, is held by a man. These wranglers know the country thoroughly and are capable of guiding parties through the trails of the back country on horseback trips; also of initiating the tenderfoot into some of the details of ranch life.

Down in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a woman "dude wrangler" has been engaged in this line of work for the past five years and has made good at it. She is Miss Erna Ferguson, a native of Albuquerque, who has familiarized herself with the Navajo, Hopi, Pueblo, Apache, and other Indian reservations and villages thereabouts and makes a business of conducting parties of "dudes" or tourists to visit these redskins in their native abodes. Miss Ferguson is very popular with the Indians whom she leads people to see. One of these tribes is reported to have adopted her into its membership, rechristening her "Sik-way-nin," which means "Beautiful Swift Fox." This name was given because Miss Ferguson, on one occasion, joined in some of the tribal races and succeeded in out-running the Indian girls.

The territory covered by this woman "dude wrangler's" trips covers the Pueblo Indian villages of northern New Mexico, the Navajo reservation in Arizona, and the Hopi villages perched on top of their mesas in Hopiland; also the Apache Trail, the Petrified Forest and the Painted Desert. In order to make herself capable of conducting parties to these places in such a way as to make the trip informative, Miss Ferguson has spent a great deal of time in studying the history, language, customs, ceremonies, and other phases of the life of the Indians of that region.

Riding Blazes

by Ray Humphreys

Author of "Loaded for Bear," etc.

THERE was unrest on the Que-Na-Bel Indian reservation in the San Luis valley, and there was unrest in the heart of Sheriff Joe Cook of Monte Vista. The Utes were in the throes of naming a new chieftain, to take the place of old Running Elk, who had died. And Sheriff Cook was worried for fear that Pete Buckskin would be elected, who was certainly *persona non grata* to the sheriff.

"Pete's got most of the tribe buffaloed," complained the sheriff, who prided himself on knowing the Utes in his bailiwick. "O' course the lawless element is with him, seein' he's one of them; an' the peace-lovin' Injuns is mostly afraid to cross Pete, who has intimidated them. Ef Pete is elected chief we can look to see Hades poppin' all winter—cattle stealin,' hoss stealin', fence cuttin', pilferin' o' ranch houses, slaughterin' the game out o' season, hay stack fires, an' most everything else!"

"Now, ol' Standin' Bear, the medicine man——" began "Shorty" McKay, Cook's deputy; but Cook interrupted Shorty.

"Ol' Standin' Bear is my choice, o' course," exclaimed the sheriff, banging a fist on his desk; "grantin' that the ol' codger is a faker an' as near a humbug as an Injun ever gits, he's got plenty o' good horse sense under his scalp. He knows which side the tribe's bread is buttered on. He's agin' lawlessness; an', bein' a good farmer hisself, he'd encourage the tribe in farmin' their lands instead o' chasin' around raisin' particular heck!"

"Ef we could elect him," suggested Shorty.

"Them's been my efforts for the past

week," said Sheriff Cook, wearily, "but I don't seem to be gittin' nowhars."

And that was the truth. All the lobbying Sheriff Joe Cook was doing on the Que-Na-Bel reservation wasn't getting him or his candidate, old Standing Bear, to first base in the election game. A large portion of the tribe was for Standing Bear, as a matter of fact; but they were afraid to come out openly for him in the face of Pete Buckskin, who had an unsavory reputation and an education that had begun with bad whites and ended up with bad Mexican hombres below the Rio.

"Pete, he bad egg," agreed Charley Spotted Horse, one of the older men in the tribe. "He get Utes into heap trouble, you betcha, ef him chief. But me vote for Pete. Pete has heap long memory. Pete also he have heap long knife—and sharp!"

That was the way it was, as the sheriff found out in his canvass of the situation. Practically all of the old men of the tribe were for Standing Bear, the ancient medicine man; while only the younger and tougher tribesmen were for Pete Buckskin. From many of the middle-aged Indians the sheriff could get no expression of choice. In their hearts they were probably for the medicine man, but they were too much afraid of the evil Pete to admit it. While Pete and old Standing Bear had both announced their candidacies for the chieftancy, Pete seemed to be making a walk-away race of it despite the known fact that the sheriff was behind Standing Bear.

"Standin' Bear, him ol' fool," said the younger Utes. "He make rain come—bah! He make good crops—bah! He make big talk with white mans like ol' woman. We no want him our chief."

As far as the sheriff could ascertain, two days before the scheduled election at the reservation, Standing Bear appeared to be beaten five to one; but when, on the day before the election, Standing Bear rode into Monte Vista and confided a secret to Sheriff Cook, the latter threw up his hands in utter despair.

"You what?" Cook cried, aghast. "You did what?"

"Me mebbe chief," explained the old medicine man, with a crafty smile. "Me challenge Pete Buckskin to make miracle—so! Me send Pete word by runner to get ready big test. Me an' him, we see."

"Good gosh!" said the sheriff, hopelessly. "I figgered you'd be beaten five to one; but now you'll be snowed under—ten to one at least. You can't make any hokum with Injuns these days, Standin' Bear. An' that Pete he sure enough show you up as a faker; like as not he'll ask you to make rain or something, an' you can't perduce——"

"No! No!" protested the ancient medicine man, vigorously. "Not that! What ef Standin' Bear no can make rain; can Pete Buckskin make rain? No! Standin' Bear challenge Pete to make big test o' bravery or power—no medicine, just big strength."

"Worse an' more of it!" groaned the sheriff, miserably. "Pete's crooked as a dawg's hind laig is, Standin' Bear; an' he's strong as a hoss, too; an' he's got nerve. He'll show you up sure as shootin'. He'll propose some test that'll leave you settin' in the dust while he gits by with flyin' colors."

"Huh!" said old Standing Bear, thoughtfully, "then why deputy sheriff, boy Shorty, tell Standin' Bear to do all this?"

Sheriff Cook looked up with startled eyes.

"Shorty suggested this foolishness?" he demanded; and, when old Standing Bear nodded solemnly, the sheriff said a word that sounded like some of Pete Buckskin's language. The old medicine man, shaking his head dolefully, aware now that perhaps he had made a mistake, kicked his old gray horse in the

ribs and ambled off. The Sheriff, muttering to himself, went back in his office.

When Shorty came in, late that afternoon, he was bristling with important news from the Que-Na-Bel reservation; and the sheriff, who had been nursing his grouch all afternoon, allowed him to open the subject on which Cook intended to do some tall orating himself.

"Ol' Standin' Bear, wise ol' owl, challenged Pete Buckskin to a test o' strength to-day," said Shorty, breathlessly; "an' that just set right with the tribe, who is crazy to see something unusual pulled off to make the 'lection more interestin'. An' Pete he came right back, by courier this afternoon, and challenged ol' Standing Bear to make an exhibition ride on Blazes—that baldfaced outlaw cayuse o' Eddie Owens'. Pete dared ol' Standin' Bear to ride that fuzztail. Oh, lawsy, lawsy!"

The sheriff, with a face as white as a sheet, got to his feet; and he pointed an accusing finger at Shorty.

"Ol' Standin' Bear wouldn't last ten seconds on that Blazes hoss," said Cook, wrathfully, "an' you know it. I hears it was you yourself that proposed the whole idear to simple-hearted ol Standing Bear, now——"

The sheriff paused a swift second.

Just hand over your badge, Mister Shorty, an' then git outta here; you're double-crossin' somebody, an' from what I can see an' hear it's me."

"But——"

"Git out—now!"

After that formality was over the sheriff banged his desk down and gave himself up to a bitter prophecy.

"This time to-morrow Pete will be chief, an' then look out. He'll take things out on me because I was agin' him; like as not it'll mean my job in the end. An' as fer Shorty—wal, he may be playin' politics, too, come to think of it. Like as not he's got his eye on my job an' is figgerin' on Pete to help him git me out an' git him in. Fine business! Fine business!"

The day of the election came bright and cloudless; and all of Monte Vista was on hand at the reservation, it seemed, to see the new chief elected and put into office with tribal ceremonies hundreds of years old. The fact that both aspirants for the chieftancy were to attempt to ride Eddie Owens' outlaw bucker, "Blazes," added to the zest of the occasion. There were many who declared that even Pete couldn't ride the broncho.

"It's the one who stays on longest," it was explained, at the reservation; "an' Pete he strong man, while Standin' Bear him old an' feeble."

The inference was clearly drawn.

Sheriff Cook arrived at the reservation early, with Floyd Penny, Ralph Fairly, and "Red" Feeny, whom he had sworn in as special deputies for the affair. The news that he had "canned" his former deputy, Shorty, had spread clear through the valley; and there were ugly rumors attached to the news. It was hinted that Shorty was attempting to "frame" the election for Pete, who was not Cook's choice for chief; but neither Shorty nor the sheriff would comment on the situation. Shorty, to the surprise of the sheriff, had been chosen as a sort of referee in the bucking contest, which indicated that Shorty surely must be "settin' pretty" with both candidates.

The open space where the contest was to be held, to the rear of the Ute village, sloped away up a gentle hillside. Shorty, with the aid of Indian police, crowded the spectators, both red and white, to the end of this arena closest to the village. It was explained that there was to be no interference with the riders, for each was to get a fair deal.

"I have picked Joe Clark, Paul Johnson, an' Bill Graham as my assistants," announced Shorty, pompously, through

a megaphone; "an' they will be my pick-up men fer this two-man rodeo!"

There was a big laugh at that—and nobody laughed harder than Sheriff Cook; but his laugh was sarcasm, not mirth.

Three prize boneheads," said the sheriff; "whatever them birds try to do they'll bungle. A fine lot o' managers we have with us to-day, Standin' Bear!"

"Standin' Bear feel happy," said the old medicine man, who had just come up. "Heap good medicine to-day!"

And with that he went on, towards the village.

"Ol' fool!" said the sheriff, sorrowfully; but his meditations were cut short by an uproar to his left. It appeared that a fight was imminent; and the sheriff spurred toward the knot of excited Indians, who broke up as the white man approached. From an old Indian, however, Cook learned that three of Pete's gang had just stopped nim to warn him that if he didn't vote for Pete for chief there would be trouble for him and his household.

"More intimidation!" said Cook, bitterly. "Ef this was a white man's election I'd sure have the Monte Vista jail full right this minnit. However, seein' it's an Injun affair——"

The sheriff was prudent enough to know his place.

Meanwhile preparations for the big test of strength went right ahead. The arrival of Eddie Owens with a rangy black horse at the end of a lariat was the signal for an outburst.

"Thar's that Blazes hoss!"

"Purty, ain't he?"

"Don't look so mean at that, does he?"

Eddie bowed to the acclamations, but headed on towards the adobe corral in which the saddling was to be done. Once the black horse was in the corral Shorty popped out on his own horse and made another announcement which caused the sheriff to snicker.

"Me an' my helpers—Joe Clark, Paul Johnson, an' Bill Graham, together with Eddie Owens, owner o' this wild hoss—are ready to saddle 'im up," said Shorty. "Meanwhile I calls Pete Buckskin and old Standing B'ar, them bein' the candidates, to come forward and draw a slip outta my hat to see who rides fust an' who rides last. Come on!"

Instantly a tall Indian, with sharp features, and a hue that was more black than red, stalked towards Shorty.

"Hullo, Pete!"

"Hullo, Shorty!"

There was a lull while Shorty waited for Standing Bear, but no Standing Bear appeared to draw for place.

"Standing B'ar!" whooped Shorty, again.

"Standin' Bear in tepee makin' good medicine," said an old Indian, approaching. "Me draw for Standin' Bear, please!"

Pete Buckskin gave the old man a withering look.

"Age an' the open grave fust," said Shorty, graciously, "draw, old man, draw for Standing Bear!"

The old man drew forth a slip.

"I'll take what's left," said Pete Buckskin proudly; and Shorty reached in and opened up the remaining slip of paper.

"You'll ride first," said Shorty to Pete; "the old man drew the second ride. Folks, let me introduce to you all here to-day Mister Pete Buckskin o' the Que-Na-Bel Injun reservation, leadin' candidate for chief o' the Utes, who has just drawed the fust ride on Blazes—that mean outlaw hoss belongin' to Eddie Owens, the prominent Larimer Creek rancher. Folks, three cheers fer Pete Buckskin!"

There was a deafening uproar.

"Alright, boys," yelled Shorty, over his shoulder, to his helpers in the adobe corral; "saddle up that he-devil Blazes, pronto. Pete Buckskin is ready to ride!"

There was more cheering from Pete's friends.

"Now, ladies an' gents," announced Shorty, making the most of his chance to shine, "while the boys are saddlin' that hoss in thar, we'll hear a few words from Pete Buckskin, leading candidate fer chief o' this tribe!"

There was more cheering.

"Hullo," said Pete, sourly, as he stood up in the stirrups on Shorty's horse after Shorty had urged him up. "Me say Pete he ride that bad hoss purty easy; he get elected big chief same way. Pete he be good chief. He say Injun get more rights. One moon—many moons back—Injun own all this land; Pete know that well. Pete say Injun get more land. Pete he find out about Injun rights."

Cheers interrupted Pete; and Shorty touched him on the arm, fearful that Sheriff Cook, already boiling over with rage, would fly off the handle at such open talk.

"Alright, Pete," said Shorty, "that's enough; the hoss is ready. You make big ride now!"

"Sure, Mike!" said Pete, easily.

At that the Indian police pushed back the crowds, and Shorty's men rode out of the corral with the black all saddled and ready. The outlaw was trembling and a-quiver with excitement. Pete eyed him sourly and was about to mount when there was a low murmur through the crowd and then a weird chant that made Pete swing angrily around. Sure enough, mounted on his old gray horse, Standing Bear, the ancient of the tribe, was riding slowly through the crowd, his body smeared with red and white clays, and his hair done up in fantastic head dress. The Indians looked on him with mingled respect, admiration, and awe; but Pete Buckskin snarled out a warning.

"Git back to your tepee an' make your medicine thar," cried Pete, "or keep quiet while I ride this hoss. Look close, ol' man, fer you ride this hoss next. I'll try to gentle him a little bit fer you, Standin' Bear."

There was laughter at that.

Then, while Shorty's men assisted Pete to mount the black outlaw, Shorty spoke to the crowd again.

"Remember, nobody out on the field! It's been agreed my men are to do the work. Everybody else keep off!"

Then, eyes shifted from the old man on the old horse to the stalwart Indian who was "up" on the black outlaw. The Blazes horse, so named because he had a streak of white down his face, and also because he was as fiery a bucker as ever drew breath, seemed waiting for Pete to settle himself in the saddle. At last Pete was settled, and he gave the signal for the release of the broncho. He tried to smile but failed.

With a whoop, the helpers sprang back from the outlaw. Bill Graham whipped the gunny sack from the animal's eyes as the others released him, and the next minute Blazes was in feverish action. He reered up, threatened to topple over backward, struck out with his front hoofs, then spun around and headed down the open field, bucking three bucks a second and coming down each time like a stiff-legged jack rabbit heading away from there. Pete weathered the rearing and the spinning but the second buck of Blazes showed daylight between the Indian and the saddle; the third buck made Pete reach for the saddle; and the fourth buck sent the Indian skyrocketing out over the black's head. The pick-up men, Joe Clark, Paul Johnson, and Bill Graham, were mounted and out after the runaway Blazes almost before Pete hit the ground in his flight. The black raged up the hill and went over the brow, with the three in wild pursuit.

"One minute and three seconds fer Pete," said Shorty and Tom Deer, Indian timekeeper, nodded. It was official time.

"Pete ride one minute an' three seconds," said Tom.

Then, while Pete picked himself up and came dragging in, Shorty hustled old Standing Bear off his old gray horse and out into the field. Pete merely snarled as he passed Standing Bear, who was still chanting his prayers. The Indians watched the proceedings in amazement, wondering where Shorty and the old medicine man were going; but Shorty soon explained.

"We'll mount Standin' B'ar out here," bawled Shorty, "seein' we don't want nobody hurt ef the outlaw rushes into the crowd. Standin' B'ar might not be able to hold him!"

Sheriff Cook winced at that.

"Insultin' the old boy by insinuations," said the sheriff, to his special deputies. "I'll say that that is pure nerve. I guess none o' you boys will doubt now what side Shorty is on. Why, ef he gits that ol' man on that black hoss it'll be plain murder, that's all. I got a mind to stop this foolishness right now."

Eddie Owens, standing at the sheriff's elbow, spoke.

"Better not," said the rancher, "the old medicine man started this business, an' he'll want to finish it. Besides, the Injuns are purty much interested in this thing. Looky!"

Over the hill came the pick-up men, leading the black horse. It had not succeeded in bucking the saddle off.

Meanwhile Shorty and Standing Bear had proceeded some distance down the field, and the pick-up men made for the pair. Dismounting, the aides put the gunny sack over the black's eyes again, tightened and adjusted the saddle; and then old Standing Bear climbed aboard. The black horse waited; and, at the word, Bill Graham leaped back, taking the gunny sack from the black's head. The other helpers jumped for safety Shorty dodged.

But the black outlaw seemed petrified. He stood stock still, apparently bewildered. Only when Standing Bear shook the reins did the horse move, and then he took several steps forward. The crowd, watching in spellbound awe, sighed; and even Sheriff Cook had grasped the arm of one of his special deputies. The sheriff's eyes were popping.

"Floyd, would you look at that!" said Cook.

"He'll start in a minnit," predicted Floyd.

But the black didn't start. Instead he took a few more steps, and then the crowd heard a wild piercing yell from old Standing Bear. It was a yell of triumph. The older Indians grunted and shook their heads wisely; the younger generation stared at the miracle in front of them.

"Good medicine, indeed!" said Tom Deer, glancing at his watch. "Standing Bear up three minutes already!"

Then, standing up in the stirrups, old Standing Bear urged the black horse away from the watching pick-up men. Chanting his prayer of triumph, the old Indian rode first this way and then that way; and even Pete Buckskin, rubbing his sore shoulder, where he had landed in his ride, was forced to stare in astonishment at the old medicine man.

Around and around, getting farther and farther away from the crowd, rode the old Indian on the tamed outlaw. At length he reached the brow of the hill and passed over at an easy trot. It was then only that the spell on the crowd seemed to snap. There was wild cheering and loud yells. Tom Deer, the Indian timekeeper, glanced at his big watch.

"Six minutes and four seconds," he said, simply.

Meanwhile the three pick-up men had spurred over the hill after old Standing Bear and Blazes.

Hope dies hard; and it died hard with Pete Buckskin.

"Mebbe that hoss loco," said Pete, to his circle of friends. "Mebbe it keel ol' Standing Bear beyond the hill!"

But in a moment old Standing Bear was seen coming back over the hill, on foot; and eventually the pick up men came back leading the black outlaw.

"Huh!" cried Pete, angrily, "no fair. Ol' Standin' Bear make bad medicine. He no good. That medicine all fake—all bad."

"Medicine Injun medicine," said an old man standing by, "an' medicine very fine!"

There was a glitter in the old Indian's eye that told Pete that he was of no consequence—now. And then, as old Standing Bear came in, still chanting, he was rushed by a crowd of enthusiastic Indians and whites, who congratulated him in two tongues and several sorts of embraces. He beamed all over. He nodded, as Sheriff Cook complimented him; and then he waved a hand towards the Indian village.

"I order that the ceremonies to make old Standing Bear chief begin now," said the old man; and there was no dissenting voice to that order. Pete Buckskin, with a few of his cronies, mounted ponies and rode off, towards town; while the rest of the tribe and the white visitors surged to the Ute village to proceed with the ceremonials.

In the village old Standing Bear paused for a moment in front of Sheriff Cook and winked at him.

"Politics—heem politics," whispered the old man in the sheriff's ear. "You ask heem Shorty about heem politics!"

And then, as the age-old ceremonies of the Utes began, with old Standing Bear the central figure, the sheriff hunted up Shorty who had come in with the rest.

"Wal——" said the sheriff.

"Sure," said Shorty, simply, "politics is politics. Pete was playin' dirty with his threats and intimidations, wasn't he? Huh! So I suggested that test o' strength. I got fired by you, which made Pete believe I was really with him when I suggested ridin' that Blazes hoss. I got three trusty men; we let Pete ride Blazes sure enough. Then the boys chased Blazes over the hill."

The sheriff stared.

"They brought back a black saddler we had waitin' thar; we had his haid smeared up with paint like Blazes. Old Standing Bear rode that gentle hoss over the hill, whar he got off; meanwhile some more o' my boys had caught Blazes and the pick-up men brought Blazes back. Seein' Pete was crooked I figured that politics were politics."

The sheriff reached in his pocket and handed a badge to Shorty—the same badge the sheriff had taken away the day before. Shorty took it with a grin.

"Politics," said Sheriff Cook, quietly, "is politics whar the peace and prosperity o' an Injun tribe an' the safety and security o' a white man's town is concerned. Pete was playin' bad cards all the way through, an' ef he wasn't smart enough to see through your game, Shorty, why——"

The sheriff and his deputy clasped hands—just as a final roar of applause came from the ceremonial plaza. Old Standing Bear had made good medicine in riding Blazes, the outlaw, and so the Utes had made him chief.

Your Dog

By David Post

Author of "The Brussels Griffon," etc.

THE SCHIPPERKE

BELGIUM produced this small dog that has found a haven not only with the wealthy, but also with the owners of barges that cruise along the canals of its native land. As a watch dog the schipperke has long found favor with its Belgian masters. Its alertness, inquisitiveness, and jealous disposition make it keen to protect its owner's property. It has, too, a great fondness for the water and will keep a boat free from rats.

The wealthy like it, because it is an active dog that does not require especial care and becomes devoted to some one member of the family. Those who have a schipperke usually find, indeed, that they cannot be very attentive to other pets, for the "little skipper" is intensely jealous and will brook no rivals.

For many generations Belgian boatmen have docked or removed entirely the tails of their barge dogs. A requirement for this breed now is that it be tailless, so the caudal appendage is removed when the puppy is very young. It is said that many schipperkes now are born without any tail.

As yet this dog has not become as popular in the United States as it is abroad. There are, however, several fanciers who are specializing in the breed here now. Show dogs approximate the following standard:

Head—Should resemble that of a fox. The skull should not be round, but broad, and should have little stop. Moderate in length, the muzzle should be fine but not weak; the fore face should be well filled out under the eyes.

Nose—Small and black.

Eyes—Dark brown, small, more oval than round, and not full; they should be bright and full of expression.

Ears—Of moderate length, not too broad at the base, and tapering to a point. They should be carried stiffly erect, and when in that position the inside edge should form as near as possible a right angle with the skull.

Teeth—Strong and level.

Neck—Strong and full, rather short, set broad on the shoulders, and arched slightly.

Shoulders—Muscular and sloping.

Chest—Broad and deep.

Back—Short, straight, and strong.

Loins—Powerful and well tucked up.

Forelegs—Perfectly straight, set well under the body, and neither too light nor too heavy in bone.

Hindlegs—Strong and muscular; the hocks should be well let down.

Feet—Small and catlike. The dog should stand well on its toes.

Nails—Black.

Hind quarters—Slender, compared with the forelegs. The thighs should be muscular and well developed, the rump well rounded. The schipperke should be tailless.

Coat—Black, abundant, dense, and harsh. On the head, ears, and legs, the hair should be smooth.

It should lie close on the back and sides, but erect and thick round the neck, forming a mane and frill there. The back of the thighs should be well feathered.

Weight—About twelve pounds.

General Appearance—That of a small, compact, very lively and alert animal, with a sharp expression.

In a forthcoming issue of Western Story Magazine I shall tell you about a dog so small that it can be held on the palm of the hand. The chihuahua will be presented to you in my next article.

CATTLE RUSTLERS STILL ACTIVE

ALTHOUGH it may be the impression in some quarters that cattle rustling, brand blotting, and other methods described in stories about the West for the stealing of stock on the range, are a thing of the past, such is far from the case. Out in the sparsely settled territory of northeastern Nevada, northwestern California, and southeastern Oregon, where stockraising is conducted under conditions that approach those of thirty or forty years ago, bands of cattle thieves are constantly active.

The use of fast motor cars helps these modern rustlers, but otherwise they work pretty much in the old-fashioned way. Their method is to cut out some of the best bands of cattle from the herds grazing on the range, herd them into some cañon or other convenient hiding place, and there blot or otherwise change the brands. The rustled cattle then are taken to some distance and there marketed. Thousands of valuable cattle are stolen in this way every year; and it is a difficult task for sheriff's posses to make any progress in running down and capturing the marauders, or in recovering the stolen property. The cattle thieves know the desert country thoroughly and can cover up their trails and disappear as if by magic almost under the very noses of a posse. It is thought that they have been given aid by disgruntled homesteaders, many of whom still harbor a grudge against their natural enemies, the cattlemen.

Thus, in spite of large rewards offered by cattlemen's associations, and the efforts of sheriff's posses, the rustler still plies his trade and gets away with large numbers of fine live stock year after year.

Miners—Lucky and Unlucky

By BRITTON DAVIS

I.—LEADVILLE.

THESE stories have one merit—they are true. The late Senator Tabor of Colorado was not the only one favored by an extraordinary freak of fortune. That his great wealth was the direct result of "a chance in a million," is well authenticated. You will find an account of its acquisition in "Emmons' Monograph on Leadville," compiled and published under authority of the bureau of mines, department of the interior, Washington, D. C.

For those who have never heard it, or have not access to Dr. Emmons' invaluable addition to American mineralogy, the story may be briefly repeated here.

In the earliest days of Leadville, before the building of the railroad that later connected that city with Denver and the rest of the world, Tabor owned some freight teams with which he was trafficking between Leadville and Denver. It was a time of great excitement in Leadville. New mines were being discovered almost daily; and fortunes were made over night. Some merchants in Denver, with whom Tabor was doing business, authorized him to purchase a good prospect for them in case he happened on one during his trips to Leadville.

At Leadville Tabor let it become known that he was in the market for a purchase. A shiftless character, known as "Chicken Johnny," heard of Tabor's desires. Johnny had a prospect on which he had sunk a shaft to a depth of some forty or fifty feet but had discovered no ore. To all appearances the property was worthless. Johnny purchased from another mine a wagon load of good ore and dumped it down his barren shaft. Then he hunted up Tabor.

Tabor purchased the claim for ten thousand dollars, borrowing the money. Johnny celebrated by getting drunk and spreading the story through the saloons in Leadville. Tabor's backers in Den-

ver heard it and refused to take the claim off his hands.

Tabor had to sacrifice his teams to meet his note. With what he saved from the wreck he set to work sinking the shaft Johnny had started. At no very great additional depth he ran into a body of ore that proved to be one of the bonanza finds of the early Leadville days, that made him one of the—then—very rare millionaires, and that sent him to the United States senate.

II.—EL TIGRE.

SENATOR TABOR was not the only lucky man I have known. Jim was assistant foreman of a cattle ranch I managed in northern Chihuahua, a position he had taken on the advice of his physician, and one that he had held for four years. His health restored, tiring of the monotony of life on a small ranch, he decided to go prospecting in the adjoining State of Sonora, although his knowledge of mines and mining was nil.

Riding along a trail in the mountains one day, he came upon three Americans in camp. Stopping for a chat with them he was told that they were miners from Colorado who had also come to Sonora to prospect. One of them took from his pocket a piece of ore he had brought from Colorado and remarked that he wished he could find something like it.

"Why!" said Jim, "I saw some rock like that this morning, back on the trail about ten or twelve miles."

They returned with Jim along the trail and located El Tigre Mine. Within a year Jim sold his interest for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Lucky? Well, I don't know. Jim was soon wondering how and why money went so fast; and a fourth interest in El Tigre, around which a large town has grown up, is worth to-day several millions.

III.—NAICA.

YET miners are not always lucky. Pedro and Cruz, Mexican friends of mine, owned a mine in the State of Chihuahua. It was an old property that had been worked unsuccessfully, many years previous, by Mexican owners. It had cost them an insignificant sum to acquire it; and they had made no effort to develop it, contenting themselves with paying the taxes every year in the hope of some day selling it at a comfortable profit.

One morning Pedro was taking a constitutional in the Plaza of Chihuahua City when he was approached by four Mexicans dressed in overalls, who asked him if he were the owner of Naica. Pedro replied that he and a friend of his were the owners. The spokesman of the party then inquired if Naica was for sale.

Pedro casually replied that he had not made any effort to sell it but would consider a sale at a price that would appeal to him and his partner.

Pedro continued his stroll as the Mexicans consulted. Presently the men rejoined him and asked him his price.

The mine had cost him and Cruz less than a thousand dollars. They had hoped to get three or four, possibly five, thousand for it.

To start negotiations Pedro suggested a price of fifteen thousand dollars. One of the men promptly took from a pocket of his overalls a certified check for twenty-five thousand dollars and handed it to Pedro with a request that he take out of it his fifteen thousand dollars, leaving the balance to their credit in the Chihuahua bank on which the check was drawn.

Cruz was called; he eagerly approved the sale; the deed was drawn and delivered to the purchasers. Then Pedro and Cruz went to the bank to cash the check.

"You are a lucky fellow, Pedro," said the banker, "and I am sure you got a good price."

"Yes," said Pedro, "a very good price—fifteen thousand dollars."

The banker sank back in his chair and raised his hands above his head in astonishment. Then he turned to Pedro and shaking an impressive finger at him asked:

"Do you know who those men are?"

"No," replied Pedro.

"Some poor devils of miners who have made a stake and want to gamble for a bigger one in Naica?" suggested Cruz.

"Poor devils of miners!" said the banker. "Those men are four of the richest merchants in Monterey; and two of them are experienced miners as well. For a month they have had engineers examining your Naica mine. They have with them certified checks for a hundred thousand dollars more and were ready to pay all of it for Naica if you had demanded it."

Pedro and Cruz left the bank and crossed the Plaza to their favorite cantina. Not a word was spoken until a bracer had been ordered and consumed. Then Pedro turned to Cruz with a mournful shake of his head as he sighed: "Suerte de minero"—Miner's luck.

DUDE RANCHES POPULAR

FROM all reports, the dude ranches of the West are having a prosperous year and are attracting more visitors than ever. These dude ranches give the tourist or vacationist from the cities the opportunity of a few weeks of real ranch life, without any of the hardships and inconveniences which the range cowboy has to endure. A horse is usually supplied to the "dude" or guest for the duration of his stay; and the visitor has opportunities for living out in the open, sleeping in a tent or log cabin, riding herd, roping, branding, and other details of cattle-ranch work with the cow-punchers.

According to a recent estimate, Wyoming has eighty leading dude ranches. The most important center of the guest ranch is Park County, adjacent to Yellowstone Park, also known as "The Buffalo Bill country." The county has eighteen of these ranches; while Sheridan County, in the Big Horns, has twelve; and Teton County, ten. Albany and Fremont Counties each have eight; Johnson County, six; Carbon, Sublette, and Washakie Counties, four each; Big Horn County has two large ranches which extend their hospitality to visitors; and Crook, Hot Springs, Lincoln, and Platte Counties have one each.

While there is a tendency in some quarters to ridicule the practice of opening ranches to the tenderfoot from the East and other points of the compass, the dude-ranch vacation is really a splendid and enjoyable experience and draws visitors back to the "dude-ranch country" year after year for a few weeks of living in the open, riding with the cowboys on the range, and taking long pack trips over the remote forest and mountain trails of the Big Horns, Tetons, and the Yellowstone.

The Round-Up

ONE of our writer chaps, it seems, made a mistake in a recent issue of the magazine. Sorry, folks, but we're mighty glad we've got, not only such well informed readers, but also readers who hasten to impart their information to us.

For reasons that he does not state, the reader who will now speak to you on the subject of the aforesaid mistake, desires us not to mention his name, nor that of the company which employs him. However, he has given us his name and that of his company. You can take our word for that part of it. Now, if you will kindly lend your attentive ear to him, we'll be obliged, and you'll be informed:

"BOSS AND FOLKS: In a recent issue of your magazine, there appeared an article concerning placer mining. In this article, you state that there are no placer mines in Nevada, among other States, and I wish to take this opportunity to set you right in this matter.

"The Round Mountain Mines Company is and has been operating since 1906 the largest placer mine—at the present time—in the United States, and possibly the largest in the world. This last is not based on positive information, but I believe you will find it true. The company holds something like twenty-five hundred acres of lode and placer claims, extensive water rights, pipe lines, and so forth.

"The placer mining is done by the hydraulic method, large giants—water nozzles—being used for cutting the banks and washing the gravel down a flume about a mile long. The gold is all coarse, with large nuggets appearing at times.

"With the exception of this company, I believe you are correct in stating that there are no placer mines in this State."

Well, anyway, the author missed only one, but it seems to have been a big one. And now we all know about that one. We thank our friend, and hope he makes the journey to the Round-up again, not only to set us straight when we shoot wide of the mark, but to join our merry and friendly gathering.

George Gilbert, who writes stories that prove entertaining, exciting, and also informative, has something to say as to the endurance of horses:

Folks, George Gilbert!

"Boss and Folks: There has been discussion of how far a horse can go in a given time, whether a horse can lope both far and fast, and how much endurance a man has riding. Here is a remarkable case, strictly historic, bearing on all those points.

"In 1868 Charles Goodnight and Joe Loving drove cattle from Texas to old Fort Sumner. Loving and one of his men, Jim Scott, were attacked by Comanches. Loving, wounded, after many terrible experiences, was finally brought into Fort Sumner by Goodnight. Loving's wound was gangrened. He must have the limb amputated. The fort surgeon was away with a detail, hunting Indians.

"Scott Moore, famed as an enduring and rapid rider, out of friendship, and scorning the reward offered for accomplishing the feat of running the Indian gantlet, volunteered to ride his Kentucky mare to Las Vegas, New Mexico, get a surgeon and return. The distance was one hundred and thirty miles.

"At nightfall, Moore started. He went at a slow lope, to warm up his horse. Gradually he hit up the pace, till at the end of two hours he was going at an easy, swinging lope. Just after sunrise he arrived in Las Vegas. The mare was all but exhausted, but her rider still nursed her along at a fairly good pace. Getting a surgeon, Scott took a light buckboard and team. A breakfast, a chance to stretch, and the man of steel was ready for the return. This was to be made in daylight, through a country swarming with hostile Indians. That night Moore piloted his team into Fort Sumner. He had changed horses twice on the return trip. He had made two hundred and sixty miles in less than thirty hours. Allow the mare half of it, and she *averaged* 8.66 miles per hour. Think of what she did, on the average, during the middle period of that long ride, when she made her greatest mileage per hour! No doubt there were rest spells, given to breathe her, and to tighten cinches, and to give her water and for other purposes of the trail. She must have made many miles at about four and three minutes each to pile up that average.

"Then think of Scott's feat of endurance. It was all for nothing, however, except that the record stands as a credit to a brave man's name, for his friend, Loving, too weak to survive the shock of the operation, died."

And, while we are on the subject of horses, that colt we told you we are a-workin' on, is comin' along fine. Got so we can take a pleasant ride on him, and not a mean move out of him. And, so far, we haven't spoke even cross to him. Of course he's still a little awkward, but he wants to learn.

Now as to that ten-dollar prize that Miss Mexico hung up for the best letter exploiting her method of breaking and treating horses. We beg to report that none have come to hand, though many, many voices have been raised by readers who think that a gentle, firm method of training and education—not breaking—is the only way.

As a matter of fact, we think that *training gently,* is far better than *breaking roughly.* A few generations ago, there used to be a very cruel saying, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." Thank Heaven this maxim is now seldom heard, nor are the screams of beaten children heard. One of the worst features of corporal punishment, is that the person who administers it seldom does so except when he or she is in a temper. This always means an unjust administration of the rod, and any man or woman who has had to do with the training of children, or animals —the doing of anything, in fact—knows that if he loses his temper, the whole

thing is very apt to end in a grand smash-up.

As we have said, many letters have come in, similar to this one, which we are now going to read to you. J. Donahue, R. F. D. 499, Fresno, California, sends it. He says:

"DEAR BOSS AND FOLKS OF THE ROUND-UP: In regard to the breaking of horses, I would like first to speak this piece.

"God put us on this earth that we might meet His ends and He wants to help us in our strife. He gave us dumb beasts for helping friends.

"Being a professional at breaking and taming horses, I would like to say that I do not agree with Miss Mexico at all. Several years ago, on a wager, I took two outlaw mares to break and train. One was twelve years old, the other, sixteen. Both were well known bad ones. Outside of scars they had received under the kind of treatment that Miss Mexico approves of, they were fine lookers. Only because of these good looks had they been allowed to live to this age. I spent hours at a time with these mares, teaching them that I was their friend and not their enemy. I never carried a whip or used one, nor spurs nor Spanish bits. I fooled with the mares every day for two or three weeks before I tried to use them. I got them so they would whinny whenever they saw me, pick sugar out of my pockets, and follow me around like a couple of puppies. They wanted a friend in mankind, and they found one. The older one saved my life twice. At the end of three months they knew a number of tricks. I rode them and drove them—single and double—without bridle or lines.

"The older mare I took with me to the coast one summer. At daybreak each morning I went in the surf. The first time she saw the ocean, she trembled and broke out in a sweat. Every morning I coaxed her a little nearer the water, till she would let the water come up around her feet. The third morning after this, I went in at another place and went farther out than usual. There was no one out yet. The mare was standing on the sand. There was quite an undercurrent, and I could hardly make it toward the shore. A few steps, and I was in a tangle of sea weed. I called the mare, and she came, slowly and badly frightened, belly deep, and then shoulder deep. I caught a stirrup, we made it out together. For half an hour after that she trembled and the sweat dripped off her.

"The second time she saved my life was when we were in the hills, and I was going to ride across a foot bridge. I never knew just what happened, only we landed on the other side, and the bridge lay forty feet down in the cañon bottom.

"So, readers, I ask you, would Miss Mexico's horses or those of her friends' stand such a test? Horses, like children, must be petted, yet not spoiled. One can be kind and yet firm. These are but two of my experiences. I could write a book full of them with as many witnesses as you'd wish to vouch for their truthfulness. I am very glad that Miss Mexico is not numbered among my friends."

All very nice, but how about that ten-berry note in the old man's pocket, the one he's a-holdin' for the letter, which, to his mind, best expresses Miss Mexico's side of the matter? And, by the way, Miss Mexico, who sent us this ten dollars, is unknown to us by any other name. We have not even got her address, only her money. So, come on then, those of you who believe in spare the quirt and spur and spoil the horse, and the ten goes to the one of you who, the boss thinks, sets forth Miss Mexico's side of the matter in the most telling form.

Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, will see to it that you will be able to make friends with other readers, though thousands of miles may separate you. It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

RESPONSES to the Owl's query, as to what sort of letters you Gangsters like best, are varied. Some folks prefer bright, chatty letters; others want letters of adventure; a great many long to hear from ranches, lumber camps, and those who lead outdoor lives. It seems to me the sister best sums it all up who says, "Let us have letters read out from those in every walk of life, those engaged in all sorts of activities, and as many as possible; then we'll all be sure to find the pen pals we want."

Now for a dip in the Holla. The two top letters are from Gang poets. Corporal LeRoy C. Jacobs, 12th Field Artillery Band, Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas, wants to tell us about:

THAT GOOD OLD BRONC OF MINE.

I ofttimes hear folks tellin' of their cars with high-speed gears;
But I'll do my fancy ridin', lookin' my bronc between his ears.
I also hear them speak of airplanin' on the breeze;
But I'm a heap contented to have my bronc between my knees.
They ride up to a shop and order cars almighty grand;
But I'll ride up to a longhorn with my throw rope in my hand.
They tell of their fancy dinners, fancy eats, and truck;
But I'm a heap in glory when old Ching Chow calls out "chuck."
They think to be a cowboy is just ride and sing a song;
If they rode fence for just one day, they'd find where they are wrong.
Some folks have pals and partners they say are mighty fine,
But the only pard I've found that's true is that good old bronc of mine.

LEROY C. JACOBS.

And George W. Macklin, 730 West 14th Street, Port Angeles, Washington, sings of his adventures.

I'm a man that's been up in the mountains;
I've sailed on tempestuous seas;
I've traveled from Maine to Seattle,
From Dawson to Los Angeles.
Cosmopolis is not my headquarters.
Muckletoo was never my home.
My religion is broader and wider
Than Battle Creek, Salt Lake, or Rome.
I've mingled with those who are wealthy;
I've ridden the rods 'neath a train;
I've slept in the very best hotels;
I've camped out all night in the rain.
I've eaten coconuts in Ruruta;
I have baked sour dough on the trail.
I have worked in the mines of Montana,
And I've shot the harpoon in a whale.

Drop Brother Macklin a line, folks, if

you want to hear more of his adventures.

The next letter is from France.

DEAR GANG: This is from a Greek who would be very much pleased to exchange letters and post cards directly with some one of my age—twenty-six. I am a representative of an American concern in Europe and do a lot of traveling. I know well Greece, France, Italy, Turkey, and part of North America, and I will be very glad to give any kind of information. Actually I live in France, just near Paris. NICOLAS SCAMANGAS.

49 Rue Felix Faure, Enghien-Les-Bains, Seine and Oise, France.

A suggestion to those who have weak lungs.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I would advise Kenneth, and others who have his trouble, to go to Montrose or Olathe, Colorado, for the high altitude and dry climate there are surely wonderful. It is a farming country, and one can always find work of that kind, which is the best for one in his condition. I am personally acquainted with scores of people who have come there, some of them on stretchers, and have been completely cured.

There are lots of big farms, and it will be easy to get light work to start, though the pay might not be much, but it will increase as he gains his health, which is the main thing he is seeking. Don't sleep in a house, but in a tent or tent house, so as to get all the pure fresh air possible.

The sun shines most every day of the year, and rain is very scarce, though there is some snow in winter, but in the sun the winter days are nice and warm. The summers are not very hot, and the nights are always cool, so one can rest well.

Knowing the country as I do, that is where I will go if my lungs ever bother me.

M. H.

Redmond, Oregon.

Girls who like outdoor life, Ermine Wiley, Box 422, Cedaredge, Colorado, wants to hear from you. Here's what she has to say:

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I'm eighteen years old, have always done a man's work. I milk cows, feed horses, and do other farm work; have helped brand cattle and drive them out, have punched cows on the range. I can handle most any kind of a horse, like to work with them. I can bulldog calves from a day old to a year old.

You might think me kind of wild, but I am not. I'm just a plain Western girl who likes to work out of doors. I have my own horse and riding outfit.

To any one who lives in a city who'd like to know about farm life I'll be glad to give information.

A message from a shut-in sister. Perhaps some of you remember her?

DEAR OWL: Twice you have hunted out my letters from the Holla. Well, those letters were more than lucky; such darling replies came from every place, made me wish for a million hands to answer. My badge of blue and bronze surely is precious.

Say, Kitten, and Cherry B., also Sally, Alice, Allie, and Billie, are you reading this? Such letters, and how I love them and the writers! I want to hear from a thousand golden hearts.

MAGDALEN COOKE.

424 Lupton Street, Mount Washington, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I'm proud to wear my badge everywhere I go. I feel like I now belong to a real worthwhile Gang.—Frederick Richards, 1208 West Colorado Avenue, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Wouldn't you like one, too?

Twenty-five cents in stamps or coin sent to The Hollow Tree, Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, will bring you either a button for your coat lapel, or a pin. In ordering be sure to state which you wish.

Anxious Mother, from Tennessee, in care of The Tree, would like suggestions about places in the West where she could obtain work and keep her three small boys with her.

Porter Fisher, a cowboy, will give information about the West and ranch life to those who write him in care of the Owl.

If you want a pen pal in a far land who can tell you of his country and exchange pictures of it write P. R.

Flesch, 14 Hunt Street, Port Elizabeth, South Africa. He's seventeen, and his hobby is collecting foreign stamps.

Here's a Canadian lad the same age who's looking for some pen friends: W. L. Pritchard, Box 382, Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada.

Mrs. Genevieve Saunders, 709 W. 6th Street, Atlantic, Iowa, who is twenty and has one little boy, asks for a full mail box.

Will some girls around twenty write Miss Wanderlust, in care of The Tree? She has been across the United States four times, and from Mexico to Canada on both coasts.

"I am a sixteen-year-old farm girl who's been ill for almost three years. Please won't all of you write Cecelia Hynes, Box 181, Conde, South Dakota?"

Sara E. McRae, Box 763, Harlingen, Texas, says she'll be glad to tell about the Rio Grande Valley, "down where the palms and grapefruit grow."

More about the cowboy:

DEAR GANG: Have been reading your arguments for some time, and am sure glad to note that there are still plenty of fellows to defend the cowboy. I am referring to those of you who answered Miss V. A. S. on that subject.

I am a Westerner, a native son of Wyoming, and proud of it. I am not a cowpuncher, being a printer by trade, but I am the only man in my family, for three generations, who has not done his bit on the range. Right now I want to inform W. H. that he is in error about a cow-puncher not being a farmer. Logically he is right—but in Wyoming to-day you will find quite a few old-timers who used to be top hands on the range, who now operate modern ranches where they raise their oats, alfalfa, and wheat, also raise cattle and horses; but blooded stock, as a general rule.

There is still open range in Wyoming, but not as much as there used to be. And the State also produces—alas!—a good-sized amount of wool. You may appreciate my personal feelings on such subjects as that when I tell you that my father was an active participant in the cattlemen's war in Johnson County quite a few years ago. I am in ignorance of most of what happened then, for dad died when I was little, and my one living uncle will not tell me a thing.

Even though I am one Westerner who cannot throw a lasso, or claim to be a good shot with a six-gun, I am always ready to stand by those who can. I would like to exchange confidences with some of the rest of you Westerners in care of The Tree.

A. E. MORGANRIDGE.

DEAR GANG: I'd like to get a few pen pals with whom I could exchange interesting letters, snapshots, and opinions. I'm eighteen and have been knocking around this old world for some years, four years being spent at sea. I've been in Italy, Spain, Alaska, Central America, and the west coast of South America. I could tell a lot about any one of these countries to an interested listener, could also furnish information about California, have been in every city of over eighty thousand people. I have some interesting snapshots taken at sea I'd like to exchange. Will promptly answer all letters. C. A. B.

Care of The Tree.

ROUNDING UP TETON WILD HORSES

THE Teton district of Montana recently held its first round-up of wild horses under the auspices of the Teton County round-up district. Something like eight hundred stray horses on the range were gathered in as a result of this campaign. The horses when rounded up were gathered into the corral of the Henningson ranch, near Gilman.

The Teton round-up district was created this year by the commissioners of Teton County. It includes Choteau, Dutton, Power, and all that part of the county south of there to Sun River. The foreman of the round-up was C. W. Burns, of Choteau, Montana.

Where To Go and How To Get There

By John North

It is our aim in this department to be of genuine practical help and service to those who wish to make use of it. Don't hesitate to write to us and give us the opportunity of assisting you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

TO THE END OF THE ARROWHEAD TRAIL

RETURNING to Anderson's Ranch from the side trips which we made last week from that place, we start out on the Arrowhead Trail again, running direct to St. George, Utah, across the extreme northwestern corner of Arizona, to Las Vegas, Nevada, nearly a hundred and forty-five miles distant. Natural-gravel road with some slight grades is traversed over the Beaver Dam Mountains, with desert road to the Arizona State line. Las Vegas is the principal city in this region, and a stop-over can be made here to good advantage. There is much interesting country in the surroundings of Clark County for those who are on the lookout for a place in which to cast anchor. There are still some good homestead lands in southern Nevada, and improved lands may be bought at reasonable prices.

Passing through the Shebit Indian Reservation the valley of the Virgin River is entered near Littlefield, and this stream is crossed several times. The Valley of Fire is passed through below St. Thomas. This romantic spot was given its name by the early Mormons who first beheld it in the glow of a brilliant sunset, when the pinnacles and columns of eroded sandstone seemed to be all ablaze in the fiery light of the dying day. This is an unusually picturesque section and one which never fails to give a thrill of pleasure to the traveler.

The next run covers a hundred and eleven miles from Las Vegas to Golfs, California, over typical desert road, with some grades. Two miles south of Las Vegas there is a dry lake, and, if weather conditions allow, this can be taken, otherwise the road running along the shore line has to be followed. Twenty-six miles south of Searchlight, the California line is crossed, and twelve miles farther on is the junction of the

National Old Trails Road, over which we took a long trip in this department some weeks ago.

The landscape during the whole of this section is that of the desert. A lonelier, more desolate spot can hardly be imagined, and the silence increases the impression of a land that has been deserted by mankind. The rolling car is the only sound that breaks the stillness, and yet this very strangeness of a silent desert is most alluring to many who have never experienced anything like it before.

Another run of twenty-six miles, and the motorist is at Danby. The Santa Fe Railway is crossed at several places on this section. During the summer months the heat is quite oppressive here, but by driving during the cooler hours of the evening and resting during the daytime, this discomfort is avoided.

The trail now dips to the southwest, continuing over the desert, a few low-lying hills and depressed mountain ranges giving relief to the landscape. In early pioneer days some famous mines made this section of the desert a pretty lively place. The Tom Reed and the Clipper Mines to the north of Danby, and the Golden Fleece Mine to the west and south of the same town drew crowds of miners and prospectors, but in later years these adventurers dispersed and the desert again assumed its old lonesomeness, apparently for all time.

From Danby to Ludlow, a little over fifty-one miles, the Arrowhead Trail parallels the Santa Fe Railway, and from Ludlow to Barstow, fifty-five miles west, the country is almost similar, being level and broken occasionally by dry lakes, extinct volcanic craters and mountain ranges in the distance. From Barstow to Victorville, a run of thirty-seven miles, the route extends westward in a semicircle through the Mojave Desert, paralleling the Santa Fe and the Union Pacific Railways, but only a few crossings are made. This part of the journey is over real desert road, but it has been improved and good time can be made.

From Victorville to San Bernardino, a little over forty-one miles, the desert road gives way to a good pavement road, so that the going is easy and fast and the motorist soon reaches the summit of Cajon Pass, from which a gradual descent is made through Cajon Cañon to San Bernardino. From here the trail leads into a fertile and well cultivated valley, where numerous ranches and farms are seen everywhere from the highway. Orchards filled with rich fruit trees line the roadway, and prosperous ranch houses with flower-covered porches make a pleasing change to eyes that have seen only parched desert sands and scrub growth for some time before.

Just before reaching Claremont, about twenty-four miles from San Bernardino, the traveler enters Los Angeles County, and from here on to the city of Los Angeles the final lap of the journey over the Arrowhead Trail is made, the distance of this stretch being thirty-seven miles.

The paved roadways of Los Angeles County extend in every direction, and stately avenues of palms and eucalyptus trees add to the beauty of the landscape, dotted with artistic dwellings, multi-colored flower gardens and cool, green lawns. This concluding run into the city of Los Angeles is always a source of delight to those who have crossed the desert. The endless blossoms and the luxuriant verdure of the trees offer a striking contrast to burning sands and dry lakes, clumps of cactus and sage-brush and miles of arid spaces. Emerging from the desert into the shady avenues of the city of Los Angeles is indeed a welcome change to the traveler who has followed the whole length of the famous Arrowhead Trail from Salt Lake City, and has had the opportunity

to observe nature at her worst and at her very best.

The Automobile Club of Southern California, Los Angeles, will be glad to send helpful information to all prospective travelers on this route.

A READER'S AMBITION

DEAR MR. NORTH: I am twenty years of age, and for the last eight years I have been seeing cowboys who would come and go with the circuses and motion pictures. I have come to think that I want to be one. I love guns, ropes, and horses. Mr. North, do you think that I could learn to be a cowboy by my twenty-fifth birthday, by going to a good ranch in the West and hiring as a hand around the ranch and learn a little at a time until I know the ranching business? I know my own feelings about this enough to know that if I can get a job on a ranch, I will stick to it, no matter how rough, until I learn everything pertaining to the ranching business.

WILLIAM D. C.

Goldsboro, N. C.

You have the right idea. Now the thing is to make the experiment; and that's going to take time and some money, as you'll have to get out into the cattle country and find a rancher who's willing to give you a chance. I've sent you some localities that may be suited to your experiment.

IMPROVING SPANISH PADRES' TRAIL

A PORTION of the historic Spanish trail between El Centro and San Diego, California—originally beaten by the feet of the early Spanish explorers and missionaries—is to be made into an improved highway. The section is known as the Mountain Springs Grade. It is between six and seven miles in length and is to be paved with cement concrete twenty feet wide. Many curves in this road which have been left as they were since early Spanish times will be eliminated, and grades will be reduced to a maximum of seven per cent. This highway carries heavy traffic all the year round, as much of the produce grown in the Imperial Valley is hauled over it by motor trucks to San Diego.

RODEO RIDER FATALLY HURT

THE Sweetwater rodeo held this year at Rawlins, Wyoming, was marred by tragedy, when Earl Porath, a cowboy, of Reiser, Idaho, was thrown from a bucking horse, sustaining fatal injuries. Porath landed on top of a fence pole, and his foot was still entangled in the stirrup. The fatal injury—an internal one—was inflicted by the horse's jerking way while his rider was in this position. Physicians stated that the cowboy had bled to death, the end coming five minutes after he had been thrown.

Porath had been working in the vicinity of Rawlins for about four years. For a year past, he had been employed by the Miller Sheep Company, on their ranch a little to the north of Rawlins.

MISSING

This department conducted in duplicate in DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE and WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, thus giving readers double service, is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send us a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

SARGENTS, BEN.—Had three children, Ida, Viola, and Virgil. Last seen at Dickens, Texas, about fifteen years ago. Write to your old pals, Abe Stuard and Bud Benge, Route 3, Box 77, Lindsay, Oklahoma.

GIDEON, JAMES.—Over six feet tall. Last heard of about thirty-five years ago at Bismarck, North Dakota. Would be sixty years of age. Would appreciate any information concerning him. Mrs. Fay R. Bartley, Box 110, Whitehall, Montana.

SEAMAND, LEOTA.—Left Lawrence, Kansas, with Etta Lown, in 1911 or 1912, for Canada. An old family friend would appreciate any news from her. Mrs. Floyd Quinn, 1014 South Oak Street, Casper, Wyoming.

STIGALL, SAM and **OLIVER J.**—Father and half brother. Everything is forgiven. Please write to me. Mrs. Florence Bjodstrup, 306 Twelfth Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

HALE, Mrs. GLEN.—Please write to your old pal, Mrs. Carrie Peterson, 2344 Sloat Way, Sacramento, California.

GARFIELD, Mrs. MINA MAY.—Our letters to you at Alberta, Canada, came back. Write to your father, Dexter Brown, Oak Creek, Colorado.

McARDLE, JOHN.—Short, light weight, around fifty years of age. Lived in Florida in 1917. Worth your while to communicate with me. George Richards, 3507 Tampa Street, Tampa, Florida.

HOGUE, DEWEY.—Received all packages and letters. Write to me. All your people are O. K. My mother died in May. Esther.

WALTERS, RUBE C.—Last heard of at Omaha, Nebraska, two years ago. Any information would be greatly appreciated by his sister. Beulah Presba, 1107 North Main Avenue, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

GREEN, DAVID H.—Left his family in Indiana about fifty years ago. Had four children, Joseph, Harrison, William, and Barbara Ellen, who wish to hear from him. Had red hair. Any information will be appreciated by his granddaughter, Mrs. Henry Anderson, R. R. 3, Anderson, Indiana.

MEEK, J. H.—Your cousin would like to hear from you. Have something important I want to ask you. Mrs. Grace Hayward, 141 East Fourth Avenue, Columbus, Ohio.

STONE, ROBERT EDWARD.—Any one knowing his address please write to M., care of this magazine.

MONAHAN, JOHN.—Formerly of Dunkirk, Indiana. I have good news for him. Please write to M., care of this magazine.

PRUITT, RICHARD.—Eighteen years old. Left Fort Smith in 1925. Please write to his mother, Mrs. N. W. Dort, Route 1, Box 91, Haskell, Oklahoma.

PARKER, HARRY R.—Was formerly of Medford, Oregon. Believed to be in Nevada. Has not been heard from for ten years. Your son, who is eleven years old, needs your help. Please write to your wife, Mrs. Sylvia B. Parker, Box 415, Aberdeen, Washington.

DAVIS, VENA C.—Daughter of John C. and Ruth. Would like to hear from her or any of her relations. Her sister, Mrs. Henry Bryan, 316 East Starke Street, Rockville, Indiana.

SHEPHERD, Mr. and Mrs. B. F.—Or any of their four children please communicate with Mrs. Shepherd's brother. They were last heard of in Oroville, California, April, 1925. Robert W. Milligan, 1095 West Seventh Street, Oakland, California.

McLEMORE, VIRGIL R.—Medium height and weight, blue eyes, dark-brown, curly hair. Married in Groesbeck, Texas, in 1922. Have important news. Write to M. B. Clement, 722 West Commerce Street, San Antonio, Texas.

HANSON, GUSTAV.—Last heard of near Virginia, Minnesota. Any information will be appreciated by his sister Julia, care of this magazine.

JOHNSON, GEORGE.—Please write to your brother's family at Rice Lake, Wisconsin. J. J.

SLIFER, THOMAS.—Last known of at Springfield, Illinois. His daughter would like to hear from him. Luella Slifer, 1224 Liberty Street, Racine, Wisconsin.

DAVIS, LEONARD.—Born November 9, 1888. Six feet tall, weighs over two hundred pounds, has fair, curly hair and deep-set blue eyes. Slightly scarred about the face, neck, and ears from a gas explosion. Was an oil-well driller by profession. Last heard of at Tonkawa, Oklahoma, March, 1923. Address Box 322, Amherst, Texas.

"PAT."—Formerly of San Antonio and Mexia. Address Box 322, Amherst, Texas.

JANE B.—Please write to me at the old address. Frank.

WYKOFF, DOROTHY.—About twelve years of age. Last heard of at San Juan, California. Please write to Isabel Brown, care of this magazine.

HENRY, EDGAR.—Please write to your brother, Edward T. Sullivan, Box 32, Dunedin, Florida.

SMITH, ARTHUR and **LEE.**—Adopted. The last time I saw them was at Mancelona, Michigan. They do not know they have a brother. Would appreciate any news of them. Thomas M. Wheeler, Eleventh Medical Regiment, Thirty-first Hospital Company, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

SLATTERY, THOMAS, or **HARRY VERNER.**—Native of New Orleans. Please write to E. L. S., care of this magazine.

HARTER, A. A.—Was in the Ninth Remount Squadron at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, from October, 1919, to September, 1920. Twenty years old, five feet six inches tall. Please write to an old pal. Harry, care of this magazine.

PARCE, FREMONT A.—Last heard from five years ago at Elgin, Oregon. Believed to have owned some property near Bend, Oregon. Any information at all will be appreciated by his one remaining son, Ralph Russell Parce, 624 South Third Street, La Crosse, Wisconsin.

MONAGHAN, JOHN.—Left Butte City, Montana, for Kansas City in 1880, and has not been heard from since. Any one who can tell what has become of him will do a great favor by writing to his son, John Henderson Monaghan, care of this magazine.

HORWATH, PAULINE or **LEONA.**—Nineteen years of age when she left home, which was nine years ago. Her brother would like to locate her. Joseph Horwath, care of George Schienbecker, 2416 Greenview Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

PARKER, A. L.—Please write immediately to your old friend, "Navajo Bill," as I have an interesting message for you. Address W. B. H., Box 3, Del Paso Heights, California.

SILVA, ANTONE G.—Served as a soldier in Panama, completing his term in September, 1923. Please get in touch with your father. Miss Constance Silva, 1775 Monroe Street, Santa Clara, California.

BLASS, LEON P.—Please write to your old pal, Mabel Clark, Tonkawa, Oklahoma.

STOKER, WILLIAM WAYNE.—Any one knowing the whereabouts of this boy please inform his sister, Mrs. Earl Stonehocker, Box 261, Milford, Utah.

LEWIS, CHARLES EDWARD.—Short, heavy-set, blue eyes. Had brown hair. About sixty years of age. Was in Lufkin, Texas, in 1900. Blacksmith by trade. Please write to Peter C. Landrie, Browning, Montana.

BUDDY.—Write or come home. Verna and I want you and need you. Betty, Tourist Hotel, Fresno, California.

WALTON, WILLIAM.—About seventy-six years old. Visited me here two years ago, and then went to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. From there he went West, and I have been unable to locate him. Please write to Mrs. Lillie Bogenrief, 702 Royal Avenue, Rockford, Illinois.

HANSEN, LUIS.—Norwegian by birth. Left La Crosse, Wisconsin, in 1890. Last heard of at Great Falls, Montana, the following year. His son would like to hear from him. Alfred L. Hansen, Lock Box 425, Winslow, Arizona.

DEVAN, WILLIAM H.—Formerly of Tonquin, Oregon. A business partner in an invention. Please let me hear from you at once. Circumstances did not allow me to communicate with you or your daughter, Mrs. Rodgers, until now. James McClincy, 1753 East Eleventh Street, Portland, Oregon.

APPEL, MATT J.—Medium height, brown hair, bald, blue eyes. His wife is anxious for some news of him. Mrs. Anna M. Appel, R. F. D. 2, Elmwood, Wisconsin.

WELCH, MARY, MAGGIE, and NELLIE.—Ages from forty-five to fifty-five years. Last heard of at Maysville, Missouri. A long-lost sister would like to hear from them. Mrs. Bridget Lahey, 402 Cumming Street, Henryetta, Oklahoma.

TEX.—Daddy, please give me a helping hand for little Billy Buckner and Redbird. There will be no danger. Write to me at Nannie Woods', 104 Breckenridge, Camden, Arkansas.

NORMAN.—Send address, as I would like to write to you. Tots.

BRONSON, CHARLIE A.—Your daughter would like to hear from you. Mona Martin, 303 Wood Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

MILLER, ELIZABETH STILTZ.—Last heard of in Detroit, Michigan. Would like to hear from her. Mona Martin, 303 Wood Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

MICHAEL or **HOUSTON, JAMES, CHARLES,** and **EARL.**—Last heard of at St. Joseph, Missouri. Please send any information to their aunt, Ivan Christian, Tranquille, B. C., Canada.

DUNCAN, WILLIAM.—Age nineteen. Last seen at Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Please write to your old friend, Ed Copley, 2430 Curtis Street, Berkeley, California.

VERNER or **CAVENAUGH, CECIL.**—Of London, Ontario, Canada. Last heard of at San Francisco, California, in 1923. Write to your old friend of Manila, Frisco, and Nagasaki. Herb C., care of this magazine.

WARNER, FRANK.—Last heard of at Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Please notify Edward P. Warner, Polytechnic, Montana.

MORRISON, FRANCIS.—I would like to hear from you. Please send your address. Florence, care of this magazine.

WOMMACK, BEATRIX, or **LULA** and **JAMES MADISON.**—Born in 1880 and 1874. Beatrix is small, brown eyes, and had brown hair. James is tall, dark, and olive skin. Their mother, who is seventy years old, is in need of love and a home. Address Mrs. C. W. Chase, 653½ Third Street, San Bernardino, California.

CHENAULT, GEORGE B.—Please write to your sister, Mrs. G. F. Michael, Box 861, Sanford, Florida.

MUELLER, ERNA.—Of Brooklyn, New York. Your friend, who knew you in Harbin and Vladivostok, in 1918 and 1919, to whom you wrote some time ago, has lost your address. A. S. H., care of this magazine.

FREEMAN, SYRETHA.—Native of P. E. I. Last heard of at Woburn, Massachusetts, twenty-eight years ago. Had one child, an adopted boy, who would be in his early thirties now. The Talbots would like to hear from you. Address Mrs. W. H. Carr, 659 Moody Street, Waltham, Massachusetts.

HAMILTON, PARKS.—Please write to your mother, Mrs. F. M. Hamilton, 435 East Adams Street, Jacksonville, Florida.

BRECKLIN, BILL.—I want you to come home. We know about your trouble and have fixed everything all right. I will grieve myself sick if you don't come. Love, Minnie.

BECVAR, ED.—Please communicate with your old pal, John Conway, 415 East Seventy-fifth Street, New York City.

J. H. P.—Jimmie, please write to me. Gloria.

O'HARA, JOHN.—Left home June 20, 1920. He is a Spanish-American War veteran. Age fifty-one years, blue eyes, gray hair. Address Mrs. John O'Hara, 37 Magnolia Street, Newark, New Jersey.

SKLEPIK, VINCENT.—Age thirty-one. Left arm off. Last heard from in Florida. Please write to Max Sklepik, Q. M. C., Camp Gaillard, Canal Zone.

KARR or **LONTS, L. E.**—Please write to your two Alabama friends whom you met near Winfield one Sunday afternoon. Shall never forget you. Mattie Hollis and Gertie Benton, Route 1, Guin, Alabama.

WILKINSON, Mrs. FRANK, and **ANNIE LEE.**—Mother and daughter. Last heard from at New Orleans, Louisiana. Please write to your old pal "Billy." I have lots of news for you. Louise, care of this magazine.

McLELLAND, A. E.—Am still where you left me. Please come back. Things won't be the same as they were. Let me hear from you. I won't give you any trouble. Your wife, F. P., care of Buck.

BUNELL, EZRA.—When last heard from lived near Indianapolis, Indiana. Any information would be gladly received by his cousin, Mrs. Mattie Brooks, 1907 Randolph Street, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

LaRUE, VERDELL.—I would like to hear from you. Tom, care of this magazine.

KNOWLTON, Mrs. ALICE K.—Married at Rossville, Illinois, in 1872. When last heard from lived at Trenton, Missouri, and Pleasanton, Kansas, at which time she had two boys, Eads and Clifford. Please write to Arthur L. Dickens, Motor Route B, Eugene, Oregon.

JOHNSTON, RAYMOND WALTER.—Formerly of Valley Junction, Wisconsin. Last heard from at Sprague, Washington. I still love you and want to hear from you. Your father is just alive in Chetek, Wisconsin. Agnes, care of this magazine.

OSGOOD, OLIE F.—Father and mother are in needy circumstances. Please return home or write at once. They are trying to locate you. Their address is 440 Main Street, Haverhill, Massachusetts. Bertha.

FRY, JOHN W.—Age twenty-one. Have not heard from him since he left in February, 1925. Please write or come home. I am alone now and have no place to stay. Your mother, Mrs. Louisa A. Fry, Wallula, Washington.

BAKER, HARRY T.—I still love you and long to see you once more. Please write and let me know how you are. Mrs. Julia Baker, 1408 Fourth Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

CALLETT, WILLIAM S.—Age twenty-three, light hair, and weighs about one hundred and eighty pounds. Last heard from at Baltimore, Maryland. Write to your brother, Paul Callett, Emory Gap, Tennessee.

IVERSON, H. A.—Married. Has two children. Wife's name is Violet. Write to E. A. H., care of this magazine.

JORDAN, JOHN W.—Had "Co. A. 118 M. G. Bat." with crossed sabers, tattooed on left forearm. Black hair, brown eyes, over six feet tall, thirty-three years of age. Last heard of at Perry, Georgia, in 1920. The cause for which you went away has long since been removed. Please write to mother. Address Curtis Jordan, Route 1, Perry, Georgia.

BOCKELMAN, ALECK.—Over six feet tall, blond, curly hair, blue eyes. Last seen at San Antonio, Texas, in 1924. Please write to an old friend, Irma Greis, 5532 Indiana Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

PROUDFOOT or **HARRINGTON, ANN** or **MARY.**—Canadian or English birth. Rather slight build, short, dark complexion, black, curly hair, and blue eyes. Would be around forty-five or fifty years old. She and her husband were on the stage in a trapeze performance. An only sister, who was adopted when a baby, would like to find some trace of her. Mrs. M. Smith, care of this magazine.

HOLDING, WILBUR, and **Mr.** and **Mrs. GEORGE ROBINSON.**—Last heard of at Dallas, Texas. Have news for you. Please write to Toots, care of this magazine.

WILLIAMS, GEORGE H.—Last heard of at McCanna, North Dakota, May 29, 1925. Any information will be appreciated. George H. Davies, Box 394, Spooner, Wisconsin.

HULL, JOE.—Have not seen him for ten years. Any information about him will be appreciated by his mother, Mrs. Cora B. Hull, Springport, Michigan.

DICK W.—Will you please drop me a line? I am the same pal to you as ever. Laura Wheeler, 725 West One Hundred and Seventy-fifth Street, New York City.

MURPHY, JEROME R.—Please write to me if you don't want to come home, as I am very anxious about you. Helen.

MILLER, ORVIS ROBERT.—Left Wenatchee, Washington, October, 1925. Please write to your sick mother, Mrs. Effie Miller, Quesnell, B. C., Canada.

MEMBERS.—Of the Third United States Cavalry, including "Kinky" Louis Huested, "Spider" Ed Jirsa, Ted Vayo, and any of the old H. Q. and Band please write to Charles Benson, 65 Rochester Avenue, care of Lackington, Brooklyn, New York.

ROONEY, J.—Advertised for me two years ago. All letters sent to Springfield, Massachusetts, have been returned. I want to get in touch with you. With love, Helen Johnson, care of this magazine.

HASTINGS, MARY JANE.—Would like to hear from my relatives, who are in St. Catherine's, Canada, and Erie, Pennsylvania. Address Mrs. Mary Jane Carrick, 2413 Clarendon Avenue, R. R. 13, Jeffersontown, Kentucky.

HICKS, FRANCIS.—Was placed in St. Vincent's Infant Asylum, at Baltimore, Maryland, April 27, 1895, at the age of five months. When called for by friends a few weeks later, he had been given away by mistake, and no trace of him could be found. He had very black eyes, black, curly hair, and dark complexion. Address Mother, care of this magazine.

DAUGHERTY, WILLIAM and SARAH.—Last heard of twenty years ago at 1430 Ridge Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Please communicate with your aunt, Mrs. Anna Maguire Kervan, Ririe, Idaho.

CHARLIE.—Have had no word from you. Do you want J. to have H.? If not, come at once. We miss you very much. Mother.

LANGDON, WILLARD RALPH.—Last heard of at Des Moines, Iowa. Their half sister would like to hear from him or his children. Address Mrs. C. W. Merkle, R. F. D. 2, Filer, Idaho.

BECKWITH, DONALD ALLISON.—Born in Santa Hita, California, April 3, 1891. Medium height, light-brown eyes and hair, ruddy complexion. Discharged at Camp Fremont, California, March 31, 1919. His mother is dead and his sister would like to get in touch with him. Mrs. Dora B. Badger, Blaine, Oregon.

WEBBER, EMILE.—Missing for two years. Medium height, age twenty-three, blue eyes, light complexion, and dark hair. Information will be more than appreciated by his brother, Billie Webber, U. S. S. "Lark" 21, care of Postmaster, New York City.

CALVERT, GEORGE FRED.—Last heard of in West Virginia, about ten years ago. Was born in Roanoke, Virginia, fifty years ago. His daughter would like to hear from him. Mrs. Ethel Weaver, 11730 Edlie Street, Detroit, Michigan.

ADRIAN.—Must hear from you. Don't be afraid. Donley.

MASSEY, OBREY.—Please let me hear from you. I am down here all alone, so it would be greatly appreciated. John A. Massey, General Delivery, San Antonio, Texas.

BILL.—Would like to hear from you. Your brother, 1306 West Tenth Street, Michigan City, Indiana.

TRUMPALLA or CLANCY, MART.—Last heard of at Redding and Redlands, California, three years ago. Your brother is anxious to get in touch with you. Walter Trumpalla, 1228 O'Connor Avenue, La Salle, Illinois.

MELLON, Mrs. CHARLES, and Mrs. JOHN F. FINK.—Mother and sister. Last seen at Columbus, Ohio, December 22, 1923. Would like to have news of your whereabouts. Harry C. Clark, Box 14223, Represa, California.

ATTENTION.—Would like to hear from Jack Benton, of Birmingham, Alabama; L. L. Cook, of Fordyce, Arkansas; Jeff D. and Mrs. Ed Hust, of Rector, Arkansas and New Mexico, and Will Davis, of Kentucky. Address Mrs. C. C. Davis, Route 1, Linden, Texas.

PETY, GEORGE.—Left Livingston, Illinois, ten years ago. Last heard from at Homestead, Pennsylvania. Any news will be gladly received by his friend, Mary Kocanik, 293 Tyler Street, Gary, Indiana.

J. P. L.—Why don't you come back or write? Have looked for you for six years. M. M., care of this magazine.

LADDIE, GEORGE ALBERT and IRENE.—Taken from the Washington Children's Industrial Home at Tacoma, Washington. Write to Box 1264, Cosmopolis, Washington.

HUYCK, PERRY L.—Last heard of at Union, New York. Please write to me for friendship's sake. I want to hear from you so much. Helen Bryant, 60 Northwest Eighth Street, Miami, Florida.

RECORD, MAXINE.—Last heard from at Sacramento, California. Write to me. Brownie, 202 Park Street, Portland, Oregon.

SCHULTZ or LAPE, BIRDIE.—Born in Brooklyn, New York, about thirty-eight years ago. Have very important news for you. Write to N. T. B., care of this magazine.

POWERS, MAT.—About seventy-five years of age. Face pitted from smallpox. Left Montrose, Iowa, in 1900. Believed to be in Tennessee, running a fish market. Please communicate with your nephew, William Cameron, 112 Avenue C, Fort Madison, Iowa.

RINKEN, GEORGE W.—Light hair, blue eyes, about forty-nine years of age. Have been so lonely, would love to hear from you. Your sister, Nellie Rinken Whitfield, 902 West Fifth Street, Waterloo, Iowa.

MORGAN, BILL and "BILLIE."—D. and I quit. Please write to me at Lagrande. "Billie" Mc.

MOODY, EDDIE A.—Last heard from at Fairbanks, Alaska. Please write to Mrs. Milley Kanley, 805 Fifteenth Avenue, Seattle, Washington.

RHEA.—Please let me hear from you. Have returned to the States. F. M. D.

WOODRUFF, MRS. RUTH.—Your sister and brother are very anxious to communicate with you. Florence and Roy Heffner, 109 West 101st Street, New York City, New York.

BOWLES, JOHN DAVID.—Was at San Jose, California, in 1915-16. Was foreman for a sugar corporation in the Hawaiian Islands in 1896. His son is anxious to get in touch with him. Melvin V. Bowles, Box 1300-S, Represa, California.

PIERCE, R. D.—Please write to your old dad and Carrie. Everything will be all right. Mrs. R. C. Peterson, 2344 Sloat Way, Sacramento, California.

STEFFEE, WALTER.—Your parents wish you to come home or write to them. Everything is all right and you are forgiven. F. E. Steffee, 1127 Victory Street, Akron, Ohio.

MAC.—Cannot believe you have forgotten me. Am so worried about you. Please, for my sake, write. C.

L. B. O.—I want my freedom, nothing else. Send address, please; then there will be no publicity, and it will be best for both of us. Best o' luck. S. O.

NASON, EARL.—Six feet tall, ruddy complexion, black hair, gray eyes. Ex-soldier of the World War. Afflicted with wandering spells. Any one knowing his whereabouts please write to his wife, care of this magazine.

ARMSTRONG, MRS. F. M.—Formerly of Pittsfield and Lee, Massachusetts. Last heard from in South Dakota. Please write to Clifford R. Armstrong, 443 Gale Avenue, Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

ANDREW, FRED.—Sixteen years old, large for age. Everything is all right. Have news for you. Write to your old pal at once. Clifford R. Armstrong, 443 Gale Avenue, Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

G. H. D.—We will be delighted to hear from you. M. J. D., formerly of Eagleville, Pennsylvania.

OSBORNE, JACK.—Last seen in St. Louis, Missouri. Was a miner at Joplin, Missouri, at one time. A legacy from your sister is due you. Please write to Fred Williams, care of this magazine.

HOUSTON, EDITH ROSS.—Tall, black hair and eyes, about thirty-eight years old. I have news for you. Please write. Irene, Box 62, Udell, Iowa.

GARSIDE, JAMES, "BILL" MATHEWS, TOMMY WALDRIP, FRED KINKLER, CHARLES BEDICK.—And any of the band and orchestra boys who traveled with the Emma Warren Company, out West, please let me hear from you. Captain Harry DeLong, General Delivery, Somerville, New Jersey.

STEVENS, MABEL.—If you want to, would like to have you join me as quickly as possible. Have tried to locate you before. Address Mrs. J. M.

THOMPSON, CHARLES.—Please write to me, Jack Waldo, care of Billboard Publishing Company, Cincinnati, Ohio.

W. F. G.—Terribly lonesome. Please write as often as you can. M. M.

MILLER, PATTON.—Colored, short, small build. Last seen in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1907. Please write to your daughter; I need you. Gertrude Miller, Box 21, Sophia, West Virginia.

CHRISTIAN, WILLIAM.—Colored. Last seen in Halifax, Virginia, seventeen years ago. Scar on one cheek. Please write to your niece, Gertrude Tugmon, Box 21, Sophia, West Virginia.

TIPTON.—Want to hear from any person of that name. Immigrants supposed to have settled in Baltimore, Maryland, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Descendants moved to Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri. Address Charles J. Tipton, Box 133, Helena, Montana.

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